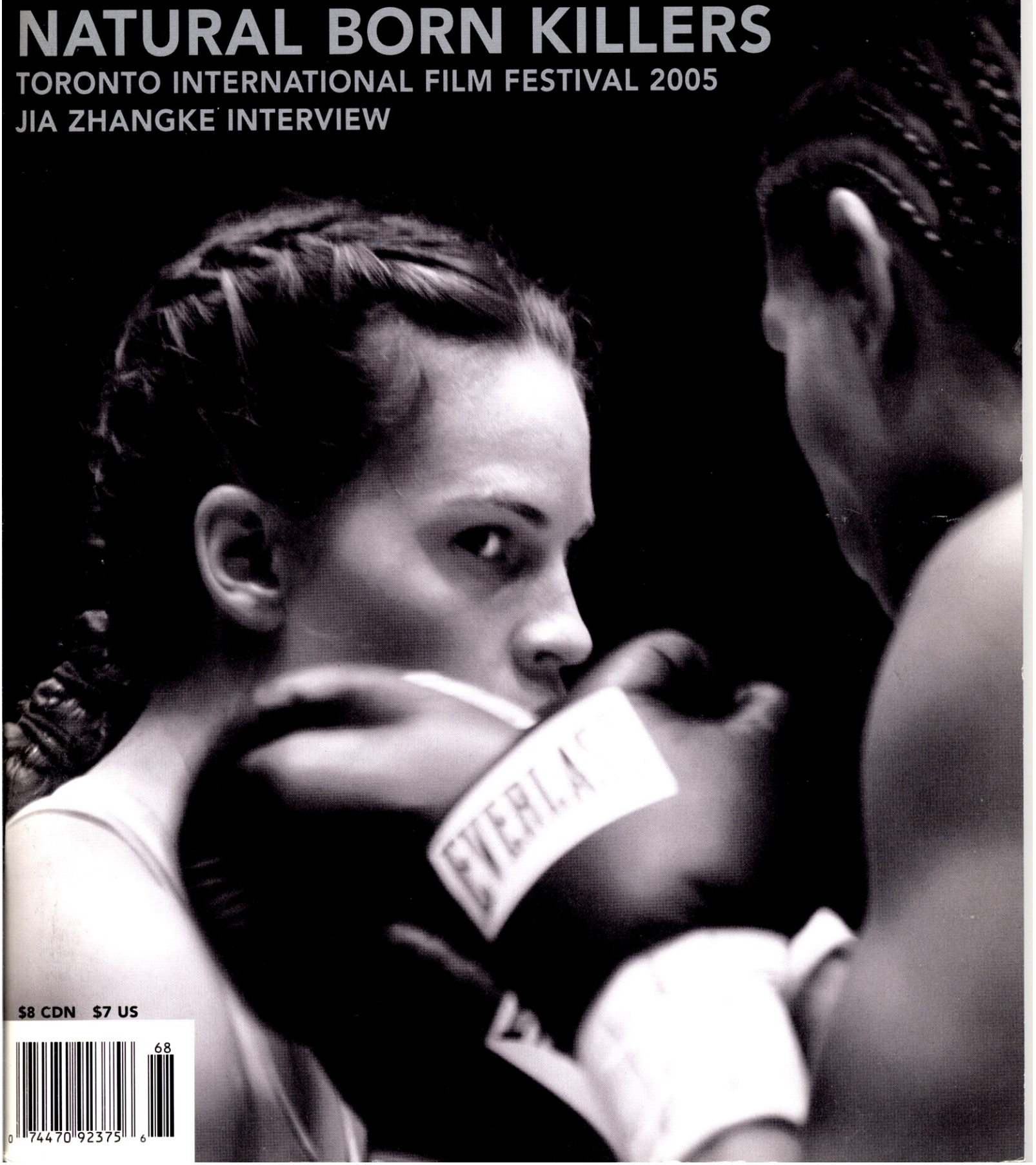
cineACTION

ISSUE 68 2006

NATURAL BORN KILLERS

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2005

JIA ZHANGKE INTERVIEW



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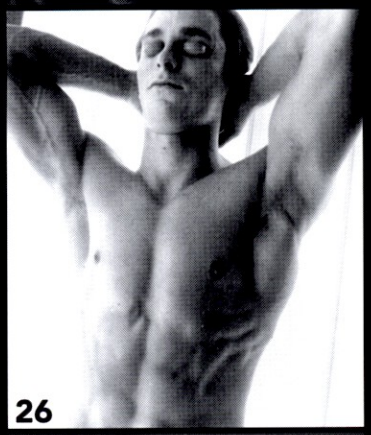
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BACK COVER: *Natural Born Killers*

Natural Born Killers

The theme for this issue of CineAction came to me as the repercussions of the second Gulf war were beginning to percolate through the very same media that had accepted so uncritically the Bush administration's claims about the imminent threat of Saddam Hussein's nuclear capabilities. Gitmo Bay, Abu Ghraib, the Wilson/Plame affair, secret CIA 'torture' prisons scattered across Europe et al... all revealed to the world a side of America that Americans themselves do not want to acknowledge: one that shows a willingness to relinquish truth, to turn a blind eye to what they have hegemonically given up in order to achieve a (false) sense of security.

After the attacks of 9/11, there appeared to be a momentary collective rejection of fictional violence as the harsh reality of what real violence looked like sank in. Of course, this didn't last long. We are once again inundated with films, let alone video games, that emphasize destruction, explosions, and body counts.

Ten years ago I edited an issue of CineAction titled "Murder in America" which dealt with various manifestations of violence in American films, mostly from the viewpoint of genre films: serial killers, murder mysteries, slasher films, police reality shows. This issue which is titled *Natural Born Killers*, could be considered a sequel; however, in light of the above political climate, times have changed and concerns have changed with them.

The issue' s title is in homage to Oliver Stone's 1994 film *Natural Born Killers* for its sardonic exploration and exposure of the interconnectedness between the entertainment industry and the US's obsession with violence. While I had originally intended issue #68 to include a global look at violence in other cinemas (thinking particularly of those of Japan and Korea), the papers that were finally selected in all but one instance refer to American films; the one exception, Nadia Bozak's piece on Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness*, takes as its subject American involvement in the first Gulf War. Kimberly Owczarski's paper is an analysis of the antithetical responses to *Natural Born Killers* and another film released the same year, James Cameron's *True Lies*. While CineAction has published a number of papers on Gus Van Sant's recent film, *Elephant*, it is to the credit of the film that there is still much to be said; consequently, I have included a paper by Michael Sofair which looks at the way in which *Elephant* is structured through movement ... what Sofair calls a 'physics of violence'. David Robinson reads *American Psycho* (2000) as a corrosive critique of American capitalism, while Henry M. Taylor compares two films from 2001, the American *In the Bedroom* and the Italian *The Son's Room* for the ways in which death and physical violence are handled. Ed Gallafent has taken a genre that is inherently violent,the boxing film, and analyses the ways in which Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby* participates in its codes and conventions.

In addition,to the above themed papers, I have included an interview with Jia Zhangke, a Chinese filmmaker whose career *CineAction* has both followed and promoted in earlier issues, and our annual collection of reviews from the 2005 Toronto International Film Festival.

—*Susan Morrison*

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

ISSUE 69 **NEW CINEMA OF AFRICA, ASIA AND LATIN AMERICA**

This issue will include broad coverage of new films from the three continents; submissions may focus on aesthetics and genres, politics, new film movements, relationship to global cinema, the legacy of colonialism and the impact of imperialist globalization. The issue will also welcome submissions of under 500 words, for a section presenting brief discussions of new Canadian films.

Edited by Scott Forsyth sforsyth@yorku.ca Please email any questions or interest to the editor.
Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editor at the magazine's mailing address by **JANUARY 30, 2006.**

ISSUE 70 **PROTEST AND REVOLUTION**

In view of the current world situation it seems important to make an attempt to restore *CineAction* to its original Leftist roots, which I feel have been to some degree eaten away by the pervasive discouragement and despair of the past decade. I would like articles on films past and present that deal with explicitly political issues (I propose to write my own contribution on *Salt of the Earth,* the film, its production and its aftermath). Our western world has perhaps reached a turning point where overt rage and disillusionment can find open expression. Recent political documentaries such as *The Corporation,* or the films of Michael Moore, demand attention. Even Hollywood seems to be awakening from its recent stupor to produce films with direct political and provocative agendas *(The Constant Gardener, Jarhead, Syriana, Goodnight and Good Luck...)* which repay careful critical scrutiny, and the more outspoken the better. There are also plentiful opportunities for the assault upon and deconstruction of reactionary 'entertainment' movies.

Edited by Robin Wood richardlippe12@hotmail.com Please email any questions or interest to the editor.
Submissions in hard copy mailed to the editor at the magazine's mailing address by **MAY 30, 2006.**

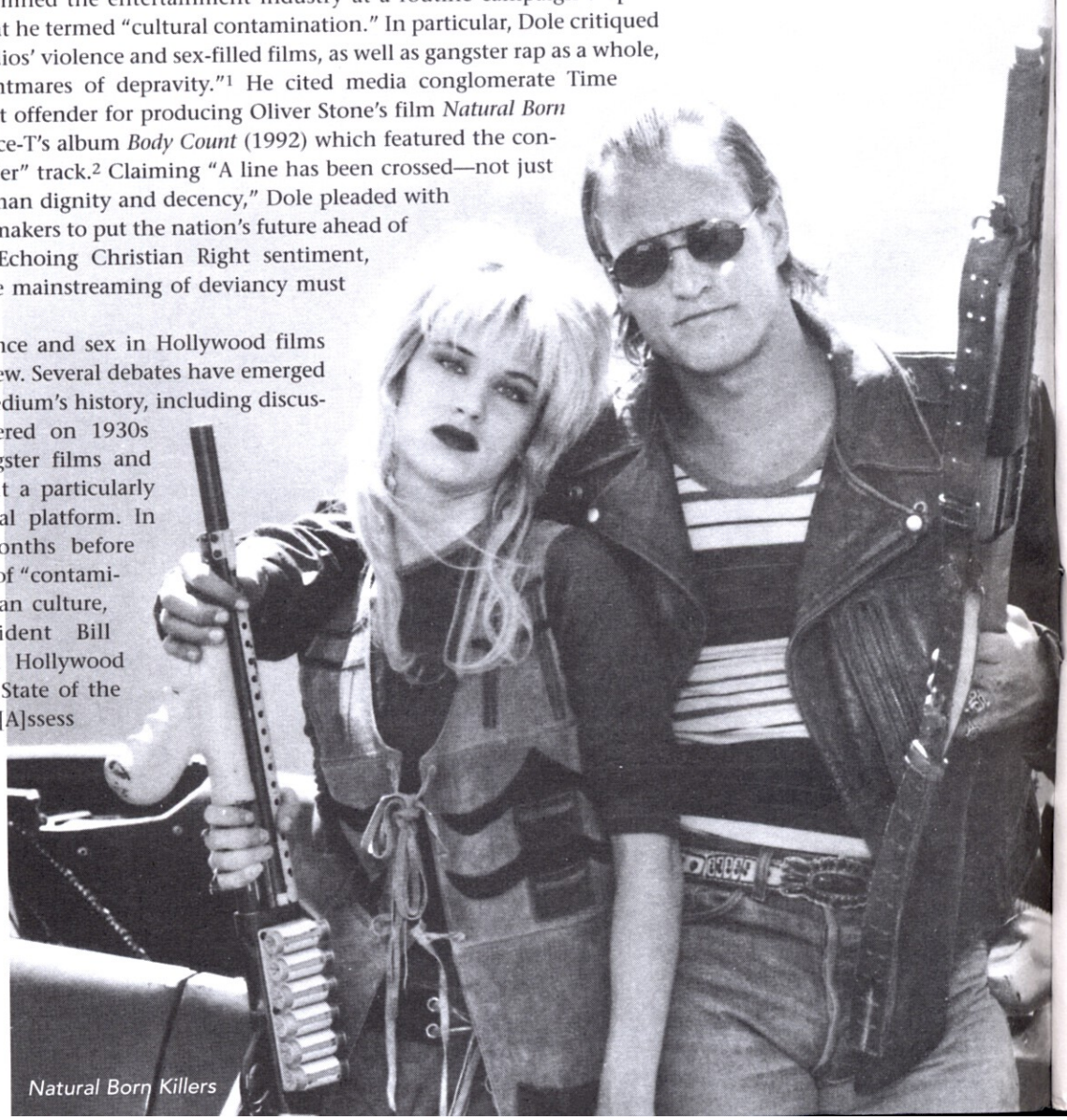
Articulating the Violence Debate

True Lies, Natural Born Killers, and the Terms of "Cultural Contamination"

by Kimberly A. Owczarski

On May 31, 1995, Senator Bob Dole, the frontrunner for the Republican Presidential nomination, condemned the entertainment industry at a routine campaign stop in Los Angeles for what he termed "cultural contamination." In particular, Dole critiqued the Hollywood studios' violence and sex-filled films, as well as gangster rap as a whole, calling them "nightmares of depravity."[1] He cited media conglomerate Time Warner as the worst offender for producing Oliver Stone's film *Natural Born Killers* (1994) and Ice-T's album *Body Count* (1992) which featured the controversial "Cop Killer" track.[2] Claiming "A line has been crossed—not just of taste, but of human dignity and decency," Dole pleaded with Hollywood media makers to put the nation's future ahead of corporate greed.[3] Echoing Christian Right sentiment, Dole claimed: "The mainstreaming of deviancy must come to an end."[4]

Attacking violence and sex in Hollywood films is, of course, not new. Several debates have emerged throughout the medium's history, including discussions which centered on 1930s Warner Bros. gangster films and musicals.[5] Nor is it a particularly Republican political platform. In January 1995, months before Dole's lambasting of "contamination" in American culture, Democratic President Bill Clinton addressed Hollywood specifically in his State of the Union speech: "[A]ssess



Natural Born Killers

the impact of your work and understand the damage that comes from incessant, repetitive, mindless violence and irresponsible conduct that permeates our media all the time."[6] Violence and sex in American media is a bi-partisan issue that focuses on our moral climate and the sensitive minds of our children. As a recurring political issue, Dole's attack on Hollywood hardly came as a surprise, particularly during a campaign for national office.

Although the terms of the violence debate were not new, much criticism met Dole's rant against Hollywood. He admitted to never having seen the films he had put on either his "family friendly" or his "nightmares of depravity" lists. He did claim, however, to have read several of their reviews. He was attacked for citing the media as perpetuating violence while supporting National Rifle Association proposals in Congress. Mainly he was attacked for his omissions. Notably, he did not mention the work of Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, or Sylvester Stallone (all Republican supporters) in violent action films or the Fox television network, part of conservative Rupert Murdoch's media empire and broadcaster of sex-filled television shows such as *Married...With Children* (1987-1997),[7] as negative cultural influences.

While there was certainly political opportunism to Dole's stance, and in his omissions, the violence in the films he listed as "family friendly"—*True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994), *The Lion King* (Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff, 1994), and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994)—differs significantly from the violence in those he condemned—*True Romance* (Tony Scott, 1993) and *Natural Born Killers*. It is the significance of these differences that I would like to analyze through both a textual analysis and an analysis of the discourse surrounding two of these films in particular: *True Lies* and *Natural Born Killers*. *True Lies* follows the exploits of an intelligence agent, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose family does not know his true occupation, but who are put in danger by a terrorist plot involving a nuclear warhead. *Natural Born Killers* follows a husband and wife team, played by Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis, of serial killers and the media frenzy they inspire. As the violence in a film such as *True Lies* is so normative that it does not disjoint the viewer from the narrative, it does not make the audience think about the function of its violence. The gruesome depiction of violence in *Natural Born Killers*, on the other hand, does jolt the viewer, and, in so doing, causes the viewer to think about the action onscreen.

It is this distinction between violence that does not make the viewer think and the violence that does which lies at the center of this moral debate. Using theories about the function of art by Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, I will examine why certain films are applauded and others maligned in their depictions of violence. Why is a film such as *Natural Born Killers* considered a "nightmare of depravity," while a film such as *True Lies* remains the "family friendly" film, even though it was rated 'R?' Why is the violence in *Natural Born Killers* implicated in court cases,[8] while the violence in *True Lies* remains unacknowledged in the larger cultural debate about media violence? Ultimately, I argue that it is the acceptance of violence as an everyday part of our culture over the outrage at isolated, provocative moments like "Cop Killer" or *Natural Born Killers* that is at the heart of American "cultural contamination," regardless of the protests made by key political leaders.

Violence and Social Relations: What is the Function of Art?

> [T]he rigid, isolated object (work, novel, book) is of no use whatsoever. It must be inserted into the context of living social relations.[9]

Through investigating Bertolt Brecht's and Walter Benjamin's theories in regard to art and mass communication, the violence debate which surrounded the films *True Lies* and *Natural Born Killers* comes into clearer focus. Without analyzing a film's "living social relations", the violence debate continually shepherded by politicians has remained shrouded in the status quo, and as a result promotes violence when necessary for plot construction but condemns media products which may instead invoke critical thought. A playwright and social critic, Brecht was extremely influential for his socially and politically conscious art. As a Marxist, Brecht held considerable contempt for bourgeoisie art and championed a more critical and political approach to art in general. In particular, he created what he called epic theater in direct contrast to the Aristotelian drama of the age. As a protégé of Brecht, Benjamin defined cinema as the art form which would bring



True Lies

more critical political and social agendas to the masses. Benjamin built upon Brecht's analysis of art by situating Brechtian principles into mass art applications. In addition, he built upon Brecht's view of the function of art by describing the "shock effect" in relation to the particular medium of film. Together, these two theorists provide a foundation for discussing the contemporary debate over violence in the media.

Brecht critiqued traditional forms of theater, particularly opera, for maintaining the status quo. Brecht further critiqued the avant-garde for trying to renovate the opera: "[N]obody demands a fundamental discussion of opera (i.e. of its function) and probably such a discussion would not find much support."[10] For Brecht, trying to fix something when one does not even understand its point was a fruitless effort. It "leads to a general habit of judging works of art by their suitability for the apparatus without ever judging the apparatus."[11] He argued that by trying to fit a work into a pre-determined schema, avant-garde artists were not altering the social or political conditions of the medium of opera. As a result of their maintenance of the status quo, truly innovative art was shunned because it threatened the boundaries of the schema: "We are free to discuss any innovation which doesn't threaten its social function—that of providing an evening's entertainment. We are not free to discuss those which threaten to change its function."[12] According to Brecht, critics only discussed operas that fit within the traditional schema; anything new or alternative which challenged the traditional structure fell by the wayside.

In an essay entitled "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," Brecht described the differences between dramatic theater, based on Aristotle's principles of drama, and epic theater, Brecht's term for more modernist theater such as his own. For Brecht, dramatic theater involved a plot with a logical progression to the ending: "[O]ne scene makes another" with "eyes on the finish." Epic theater, however, is a narrative that works "in curves," with "each scene for itself." Whereas dramatic theater "wears down his [the spectator's] capacity for action," the epic theater "arouses his capacity for action." Epic theater "forces him to take [*sic*] decisions." Dramatic theater uses the power of "suggestion" to make meaning while epic theater foregrounds an actual "argument." Finally, within dramatic theater, "the human being is taken for granted"; he/she is a necessary device for the telling of the story. In epic theater, however, "the human being is the object of the inquiry," the focus of the narrative. In order for epic theater to work, the viewer must be aware of the implications of the narrative; he/she must be "made to face something."[13] For Brecht:

> Once the content becomes, technically speaking, an independent component, to which text, music and setting 'adopt attitudes'; once illusion is sacrificed to free discussion, and once the spectator, instead of being enabled to have an experience, is forced as it were to cast his vote; then a change has been launched which goes far beyond formal matters and begins for the first time to affect the theatre's social function.[14]

Thus, the epic theater "mustn't be judged by its success in satisfying the audience's habits but by its success in transforming them."[15]

For Brecht, epic theater should "alienate"—that is, critically distance—the audience from both the style and subject matter. In particular, "Certain incidents in the play should be treated as self-contained scenes and raised—by means of inscriptions, musical or sound effects and the actors' way of playing—above the level of the everyday, the obvious, the expected (i.e. alienated)."[16] It should be exaggerated and obvious in order to critique everyday realities. For Benjamin, Brecht's disciple, epic theater "sets out, not so much to fill the audience with feelings—albeit possibly feelings of revolt—as to alienate the audience in a lasting manner, through thought, from the conditions in which it lives."[17] Benjamin built upon Brecht's definition of epic theatre to specifically discuss how certain techniques, particularly montage, carry this political and critical function. In "The Author as Producer," Benjamin claimed that epic theater differed significantly from traditional theater because

> [I]t does not reproduce conditions; rather, it discloses, it uncovers them. This uncovering of the conditions is effected by interrupting the dramatic processes; but such interruption does not act as a stimulant; it has an organizing function. It brings the action to a standstill in mid-course and thereby compels the spectator to take up a position towards the action.[18]

Montage, for Benjamin, is the primary way Brecht disrupted the narrative and allowed space for critical thought in his epic theater because montage "interrupts the context into which it is inserted." He continued: "The interrupting of the action. . .always works against creating an illusion among the audience."[19] For Benjamin, the ultimate goal of this interruption was to affect the audience, to stir critical thought.

Benjamin termed the phrase "shock effect" to discuss this disjuncture from the narrative. Using Dada artists as his example, Benjamin discussed how "the work of art of the Dadaists became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet, it happened to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality."[20] Dadaists frustrated the pleasurable desire of art by making their artworks utterly undecipherable. Stringing obscenities into a poem, their art was "to outrage the public" through "a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations."[21] In "Interpreting Punk Rock," Dave Laing used Benjamin's discussion of the shock effect in relation to British Punk rock. In order for the shock effect to work, Laing claimed, the text must elicit "a *critical* response on the part of a viewer or listener, in the sense that he or she will be provoked to thinking and questioning by it."[22] Laing contrasted the shock effect with what he calls the "leisure-effect." The leisure-effect, as part of the bourgeoisie system of entertainment, produces "a passivity of response and a disengagement from other areas of social activity."[23] The leisure-effect takes critical thought away from the spectator; instead, it produces unmediated enjoyment removed from the everyday realities of the spectators. The shock effect, on the other hand, elicits thought and a critique of social norms because it does not present what is considered acceptable.

Taken together, the ideas of Brecht, Benjamin, and Laing about the function of art illustrate the importance of a spectator who is stirred to action, including critical thought, as a result of what appears before him or her. Art needs to threaten the status quo. It needs to take a position and foreground an argument. It needs to investigate human nature. It should cause the viewer to distance him/herself from the artwork because of its exaggerated presentation, the interruption of the story, and/or its shocking elements. With film, this points to an experience where the viewer does not just sit in the dark and enjoy what unfolds onscreen. Instead of passivity, art should encourage activity. By bringing Brecht, Benjamin, and Laing's concepts to the violence in media debate, I want to raise a few questions. First, what is the nature of film violence? Second, what is the discourse that surrounds violence used in films? Finally, what is at stake when we watch a film that foregrounds violence? Using *True Lies* and *Natural Born Killers* as examples, I believe we can start to address these questions. By putting these two films into "the context of living social relations," I argue that the violence in media debate is less about the actual acts of violence depicted onscreen than it is about what it tells us about our society. The violence is less the shock than its meaning.

True Lies: Violence as Status Quo

> [*True Lies*] is candy cinema, the sort that melts in the mind.[24]

James Cameron's 1994 blockbuster action film *True Lies* follows the exploits of a secret agent, Harry Tasker/Arnold



True Lies

Schwarzenegger, and his unsuspecting wife, Helen/Jamie Lee Curtis. During the course of the narrative, Harry battles Arab terrorists intent on destroying the United States. In one telling scene, the terrorists pour cement on a nuclear missile shrouded in the American flag. Through superior physical abilities, more adept technology, and better aim, Harry defeats the terrorists who threaten both his family and the nation. As ridiculous as this short description sounds, the film plays with the boundaries of its narrative. Labeling *True Lies* "cartoonish," film reviewers did not take the narrative, or its violence, too seriously. As the above description of *True Lies* articulates, it is an example of "candy cinema": melting in the mind, causing no critical thought. The violence, seamless within the confines of the plot, is the norm, the accepted. Reviewers conflated the frivolity of the narrative with its acts of violence. However, under closer examination, the violence that lies at the heart of many of *True Lies*' action sequences is not only brutal, but also contradicts the image of the film as "candy cinema", as a "family friendly" film within Dole's schema.

As part of the action genre, film critics did not approach the violence in *True Lies* as an abnormal display. The outlandish violent acts depicted in the film were thought to mimic the film's flippant one-liners and improbable plot construction. Film critic Brian Lowry of *Variety* claimed *True Lies* "mixed plenty of humor with a cartoonish level of destruction."[25] Echoing this interplay of humor and violence, *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert claimed: "It's stuff like that we go to Arnold Schwarzenegger movies for, and *True Lies* has a lot of it: Laugh-out-loud moments when the violence is so cartoonish we don't take it seriously, and yet are amazed at its inventiveness and audacity."[26] Anthony Lane, film critic for *The New Yorker*, claimed that Harry's "secret life (government spy, saves the world) is a pubescent farce, popping with joke violence." He later claimed: "The plot involves a terrorist attempt to blackmail the world with stolen warheads, but that's just an excuse for deliberately dumb antics, the inflicting of harmless harm."[27] In each of these critics' comments, *True Lies* exhibited violence on par with its outlandish plot: juvenile, cartoonish, and, most of all, not serious or harmful.

In the film reviews, violent scenes were rarely, if ever, discussed in any kind of detail. Instead, vague statements asserting that the violence is cartoonish predominated, vague in that they assumed the reader knows what the writer defines as cartoonish. Janet Maslin, film critic for the *New York Times*, began to dissect the violence in the film, only to back off in the very next sentence: "The terrorists are crude, outrageously unflattering ethnic stereotypes; the action and dialogue are sometimes needlessly vulgar; the body count is high; like it or not, those are the rules of this particular game. On the other hand, *True Lies* is less reckless and gun-crazy than many films of its genre." Later in her review, Maslin even claimed that the use of violence has a larger purpose: "The film's ultimate combat sequence. . .manages to combine shoot'em-up excitement with something resembling family values."[28] If Maslin's review, as well as the other reviews mentioned above, were the reviews Senator Dole read in regard to *True Lies*, it makes sense that he labeled the film "family friendly." It has "family values," has "cartoonish violence," and is suitable for a "juvenile" frame of mind. Although several film reviewers critiqued the misogyny and racism rampant in the film, the depictions of violence were barely, if ever, questioned.[29]

Taking a closer look at the violence in *True Lies*, however, directly contradicts these statements of frivolity, cartoonishness, and innocuous hijinks. In examining three of the film's action sequences, it is clear that the violence in the film is far from mindless and harmless. The use of slow motion and close-ups, in particular, dwell upon the effects of these violent acts. Depicted as a natural progression of the plot, the film's use of violence slips into the diegesis without jolting the viewer. The violence, thus, is used uncritically as the means for the Arab terrorists meeting a justified end.

In one sequence, Harry waits in a stark black and white bathroom for two of the Arab terrorists who have been following him. As the second Arab terrorist enters the restroom, gun clinging to his side, slow motion enhances his determined gait and threat to Harry. With the use of a hidden camera, Harry anticipates the terrorist's moves and jumps out of the way just before the terrorist fires. After a brief struggle, Harry knocks the gun out of the terrorist's hands and throws him against the wall. The first terrorist then aims his gun at Harry. Harry again anticipates this action and begins to shoot him. A medium shot from Harry's point of view gives the viewer full access to the terrorist's body as it is ripped apart by the bullets. As if that were not enough of a look, Cameron then cuts to a behind the back close-up shot of the terrorist, as bullets tear through his body. Cameron cuts back to the frontal shot as the terrorist falls to his death, his hand still on the trigger, wildly shooting up the restroom. Harry again tussles with the other terrorist, using a hand dryer ripped from the wall as a weapon three times during the course of their scuffle. The terrorist is knocked unconscious after the third hit, and Harry is able to handcuff him. At precisely that moment, however, a third Arab terrorist enters the restroom shooting. Harry, using his prisoner as a human shield, flees to safety, as the unconscious terrorist's body is riddled with bullets.

In another sequence, the terrorists have captured Harry and Helen. Handcuffed and drugged, Harry finds himself at the mercy of a notorious torturer. As the torturer puts on his gloves, he asks Harry: "Is there anything you want to tell me before we start?" Harry responds: "Yeah. I'm going to kill you pretty soon." The torturer, unfazed by this, asks him: "How exactly?" Shot in a close-up, Harry describes his plan: "First, I'm going to use you as a human shield, then I'm going to kill this guard over there with a Patterson Troika. And then I was thinking about breaking your neck." As Harry names the instrument he will use, Cameron cuts to a close-up of the torturous instrument. The torturer doubts Harry's ability to do this. Harry then reveals that he has picked his handcuffs and does exactly what he said he would do: grabs the torturer; throws the instrument, which lands in the guard's forehead; and breaks the torturer's neck, all shot in close-up. Harry then attacks the second guard outside the door with a metal hook. As the guard slumps over dead, Harry drags him across the floor by the hook and hides his body.

In another sequence, an Arab terrorist strangles Harry.

Harry looks to his wife to fire on the terrorists. Helen watches as a number of Arab terrorists run in Harry's direction. In a close-up, Helen determinedly takes aim with the Uzi. As she fires, however, the power throws her back and she loses control of the gun. The Uzi tumbles down the stairs, still firing. The bullets riddle through the Arabs in slow motion close-ups. In one particular shot, blood squirts through the air as the bullets enter the terrorist's body. As the gun continues to tumble, more and more Arabs are shot. As the gun finally comes to rest, dozens of Arabs lie dead around Harry and Helen.

In each of these three scenes, the violence is depicted through close-ups and slow motion. Although joke elements may occur in them—for example, Helen's clumsiness and emotional reaction are clearly meant to be humorous—the depictions of violence in themselves are not cartoonish. The effects of blunt instruments, guns, and fistfights are all noticeably dwelt upon. Bloody faces, ripped apart bodies, and sadistic interplay are all part of the action sequences. Presented seriously and without abandon, these violent sequences are far from "family friendly," far from "juvenile," far from "cartoonish." They foreground excessive violence against Arabs, in particular, and justify violent action sequences as part of the plot: protecting American borders (and families) from foreign (and racial) intrusion. As such, they do not jolt the viewer or ask him or her to think critically about the violence that has been presented.

Although Hollywood cinema is not necessarily synonymous with the dramatic theater definitions described by Brecht, many similarities occur in regard to *True Lies*. In *True Lies*, every scene works toward the ultimate confrontation between the chief Arab terrorist and Harry Tasker. The conflation of national security with family protection that the film has set up from the beginning is met in the final reel, as Tasker tries to save both his daughter and Washington, D.C. from a nuclear warhead. *True Lies* "suggests" that Arabs are terrorists, but does not completely foreground a racist argument since Harry has an Arab-American on his intelligence team. Furthermore, the tertiary characters are merely devices for elaborate stunts. Nowhere is this more clear as when Harry uses his Arab prisoner as a shield in the bathroom. *True Lies* uses very little montage, and practically none during these violent action sequences. The close-up of the Patterson Troika in the torture scene does not interrupt the narrative because Tasker is describing what he will do with it. A minute later, he has killed the guard with a quick, controlled throw. Thus, no disjunction between the elements occurs; we know what the instrument is and for what purpose it will be used.

As viewers, we are never given a moment to think about the level of violence present in the film. It is, after all, a film with its "eye on the finish": the final confrontation. We never think about the politics at work behind the film since the film so seamlessly makes the Arabs' deaths just, nor do we ever confront the particularly graphic deaths onscreen. They are simply terrorists who must be eradicated and who merit such violent ends. Critics did not discuss these aspects, either; the film was too much of the status quo mold to elicit much comment on its violence. However, this would not be the case with the film's anti-thesis: *Natural Born Killers*.

Natural Born Killers: "Exploding" the Representation of Violence

> *Natural Born Killers* is an explosive device for the sleepy movie audience, a wake-up call in the form of a frag bomb.[30]

Oliver Stone's controversial film *Natural Born Killers* follows two mass murderers, Mickey and Mallory Knox, played by Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis, and the media frenzy they inspire as they go on a killing spree. After they are arrested and imprisoned, a television personality named Wayne Gail/Robert Downey, Jr. interviews Mickey for his show, *American Maniacs*. During the live interview, which takes place directly after the Super Bowl, a riot ensues in the prison. In the melee, Mickey rescues Mallory and the two escape prison and begin a new life. Notorious for its extreme depictions of violence, *Natural Born Killers* still courts controversy years after its initial release. Blamed as the catalyst in several high-profile murder cases, *Natural Born Killers* has become a focal point in regard to Hollywood's portrayal of violence and its effects on society. Film critics, for the most part, believed that the film's excessive use of violence was a direct critique of our violence-obsessed culture. Often using violent words to describe the film's effects, film reviewers claimed *Natural Born Killers* was a film whose use of violence was necessary to the film's social critique, a "wake-up call" for the American public.

Unlike the reviews for *True Lies*, much of the film critiques explicitly addressed the violence used in the film. Roger Ebert claimed that the film's excessive violence was necessary for its point:

> [Y]ou do not see as much actual violence as you think you do in this movie; it's more the tone, the attitude, and the breakneck pacing that gives you that impression. Stone is not making a geek show, with close-ups of blood and guts. Like all good satirists, he knows that too much realism will weaken his effect.

Criticizing the ratings board (which forced Stone to cut the film five times before they gave it an 'R' rating), Ebert continued: "I could point to a dozen more violent recent films that have left the MPAA unstirred, but Stone has touched a nerve here, because his film isn't about violence, it's about how we respond to violence, and that truly is shocking."[31] For Ebert, the action film is about violence, and its use of violence has become normative. Although he does not name any specific films, *True Lies* is a perfect example. Action films are not critiqued for their violence, nor are they troublesome to the ratings board. *Natural Born Killers*, on the other hand, critiques this normalization through its excessive depictions. Without naming it as such, Ebert touched on the social critique of art that Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin outline with epic theater.

The excessive use of violence that Ebert and other critics discussed in regard to the film are echoed by their use of violent language in describing the film's effects. Todd McCarthy of *Variety* claimed that the "Film's style may be akin to a shotgun blast, but it still manages to hit the bull's eye."[32] Jay Carr, the *Boston Globe* film critic, used a violent analogy to describe



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the effect of the film: "It's a grenade pitched into the media tent."[33] *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin argued that Stone "assembles an arsenal of visual ideas and then fires away point-black in his audience's direction."[34] Ebert claimed that the film "is like a slap in the face, waking us up to what's happening."[35] For many critics, the use of violent language underscored Stone's point: our culture is obsessed with violence and the only way to convey that is through excessive, grotesque depictions. As a poster-child for Dole's critique of Hollywood, *Natural Born Killers* is a "nightmare of depravity" precisely because it dares to show excessive violence. Without seeing the film, the excessive violence Dole critiqued in *Natural Born Killers* remained removed from its function within the text.

Taking a closer look at the violence in the film, it is apparent that *Natural Born Killers* uses many of the same techniques that *True Lies* did in depicting violence, especially its use of close-ups and slow motion in violent sequences. *Natural Born Killers* differs significantly from *True Lies*, however, because it does not pretend to present this violence realistically. Film critics keyed in on the excessive and stylized violence in *Natural Born Killers*, believing it to be a film that would ignite the Hollywood violence debate. Its excessiveness and stylization continually disrupt the flow of the narrative. This disruption removes the viewer from the normative portrayal of violence that *True Lies* foregrounds. With this film, I will use three examples of violence to demonstrate the film's excessive nature, and the foregrounding of violence as theme.

In the opening sequence, Mickey and Mallory dine at a rural roadside diner in New Mexico. Mallory dances near the jukebox but is interrupted by some men whose sexual harassment tries her patience. Stone frames her dancing in low, canted angles and switches from color to black and white film stock. Mallory punches one of the men and begins a fight. In a low, canted angle, Mallory kicks the man in the face. Stone then cuts to a color close-up of a table jiggled by the falling man, blood splattering across its white linoleum. As Mickey attacks the man's friend, Mallory's laugh from her riotous romp lingers in the air. Mickey spots the cook and shoots her. The camera is placed "on the bullet" and the music changes from pulsating rock music to blaring opera. Shot in slow motion, the bullet proceeds to the cook, then hesitates direct-

ly in front of her. She registers terror as the bullet again begins to move. Stone then cuts to a close-up of blood splattering on the wall behind her. Mallory, again shot from a low, canted angle, jumps on her victim, which is then followed by a flashback to one of his earlier harassing comments. Employing disjunctured film and sound images, the intercutting of color and black and white film stock, and flashbacks, Mickey and Mallory continue their excessively violent rampage until everyone, save one customer, is dead.

In another scene, Mickey returns from prison to rescue Mallory from her verbally and sexually abusive father. As part of a flashback set as a sitcom called *I Love Mallory*, Stone uses traditional family sitcom conventions in direct contrast to the violent images. As Mickey hits her father with a tire iron, the commentators from the wrestling match on the television give a play-by-play analysis of the family squabble. Carnival music and strobed camera-work accent the violent, satiric nature of the fight. A close-up of a goldfish in the aquarium briefly interrupts the struggle. Mickey hits Mallory's father several times in the back of the head, but the action is never seen; the loud cracking and the commentary, however, give aural depictions of the violence. After Mickey and Mallory drown her father in the aquarium, they visit her mother. As she sleeps, they tie her to her bed. She wakes just before they set the bed on fire. As Mickey and Mallory leave, the "studio audience" of the television show applauds uproariously at the victorious couple. Both "stars" smile and wave to their appreciative audience.

In a later scene, Mickey and Mallory escape through the hellish nightmare of the prison riot. The use of slow motion and close-ups during this scene, as well as the intercutting of non-diegetic elements, interrupts the flow of the narrative. The unrelenting, mostly black and white images of convicts torturing other inmates and prison guards, from the slitting of the throats of "snitches" to the hanging of several guards, contrast the highly caricatured warden who watches the action helplessly. As Mickey and Mallory attempt to escape, riotous convicts continually halt their progression. During the course of their escape, several of the camera crew are shot, presented in blood squirting close-ups. Stone intercuts a cartoon version of Mickey rescuing Mallory—the same cartoon used throughout the film, especially during the *I Love Mallory* sitcom scenes—during their circumventing trip through the prison. The trip through the prison is long and arduous; in all, more than twenty minutes of carnage accented by slow motion and close-ups.

In each of these three scenes, excessive violence displayed through various techniques foregrounds the unreality of the text. The use of slow motion and close-ups in *Natural Born Killers*, thus, differs significantly from their usage in *True Lies*. The violence in *Natural Born Killers* serves a function beyond narrative (dis)pleasure. Indeed, the film foregrounds the gruesome effects of violence, breaking the illusion of violence as pleasurable spectacle within a non-critical (viewing) framework. At the very end of the film, Stone cuts to a montage of televised images: the O.J. Simpson trial, the Menendez brothers' trial, the burning of the Branch Davidian Compound in Waco, Lorena's Bobbitt's tearful testimony, Rodney King's plea to the public, and Tonya Harding's fall during the Olympics. By correlating the media frenzy surrounding Mickey and Mallory's antics with these "real-life" examples of violence, Stone disrupts the illusion that *Natural Born Killers* is just a film. By relating the fictional acts of the film with "real-life" examples of violence, Stone discloses the conditions of the viewer's everyday lives: the fascination with violent acts as perpetuated by the media. *Natural Born Killers* thus "explodes" the normative use of violence in our media.

Revisiting "Cultural Contamination"

After Senator Dole's moral tirade against Hollywood, several film and social critics acknowledged the violence debate's limits. Richard Schickel, film critic for *Time*—a weekly news magazine produced by Time Warner, the company directly charged with "cultural contamination" by Senator Dole—clearly articulated the double standard between appropriate and inappropriate violence:

> [F]ew have seriously criticized films. . .[like *True Lies*]. They're just "fun with a vengeance," to quote a review of the latest [Bruce] Willis effort. From *The Public Enemy* to *Pulp Fiction*, it has always been films that make us feel the shock, pain and absurdity of violent death—and put us in touch with the secret life burbling beneath the pious American surface—that cause people like Dole to spring a gas leak.[36]

In *Time*'s forum on this debate, author and professor John Edgar Wideman echoed Schickel's statement: "We must not fear change, fear the shock and disruption true art inflicts."[37] While not acknowledging the obvious Brechtian influence, both of these statements pointed to Brecht's description of the function of art: "Real innovations attack the roots."[38]

True Lies, as a classical Hollywood product, uses violence as drama and uses specific techniques, such as the close-up and slow motion, to emphasize action in the narrative. It is not critiqued by film critics nor moral and social critics because it is normative—it expresses nothing new or extraordinary about our world. While using many of these same techniques, *Natural Born Killers* attempts to critique the violence-obsessed society we have become in the wake of O.J. Simpson, the Menendez brothers, and the Rodney King beating. Truly a bold statement when measured against the seamlessness of the violence in *True Lies*, *Natural Born Killers* remains just as controversial today as it was eleven years ago because it relentlessly attacks our social norms.

If the innovative is truly shunned, as Brecht claimed, it proves an interesting corollary to the violence in Hollywood debate. When violence disrupts the flow of the narrative, when it challenges the very assumptions upon which Hollywood cinema is based, a backlash occurs. With *Natural Born Killers*, this did not occur with film critics, but it did with political leaders. With *True Lies*, however, the normative function of violence in Hollywood films was rarely, if ever, discussed. *True Lies* does not threaten the function of enjoyable film entertainment because it does not call attention to its violence; it is a seamless part of the viewing experience.

Natural Born Killers, on the other hand, threatens the notion of film and other media as entertainment by underlining the brutality of violence in our culture.

Thus, these two films underscore what is at stake when we watch mediated forms of violence: the idea of entertainment as pleasure and the idea of art as social critique. What is bizarre in the debate over media violence is how films which foreground social critique are savagely attacked for perpetuating violence, while films that allow the viewer to take pleasure in the violent deaths of the antagonists and the violent deeds of the protagonists remain unquestioned. With similar techniques used to depict violence, the issue seems to be less about what is actually onscreen as it is the tone and meaning behind the images. Brecht argued that what threatens the status quo cannot be discussed. *Natural Born Killers* was debated in the political sphere and discussed in the judicial realm. What was left out of the discussion, however, is the normative presentation of violence. *True Lies*, and films like it, revel in a lack of discussion about the role violence plays in our culture. "Cultural contamination" might not be such an unwelcome thing for politicians to discuss, but only if a larger picture about violence in the media is outlined. As it is, attacking the very films which challenge our notions of what is acceptable film violence obscures the greater problem of our acceptance of violence as the norm. The terms of the violence in media debate need to be reconsidered if we are to understand the linkage between mediated acts of violence and their effect on society as a whole.

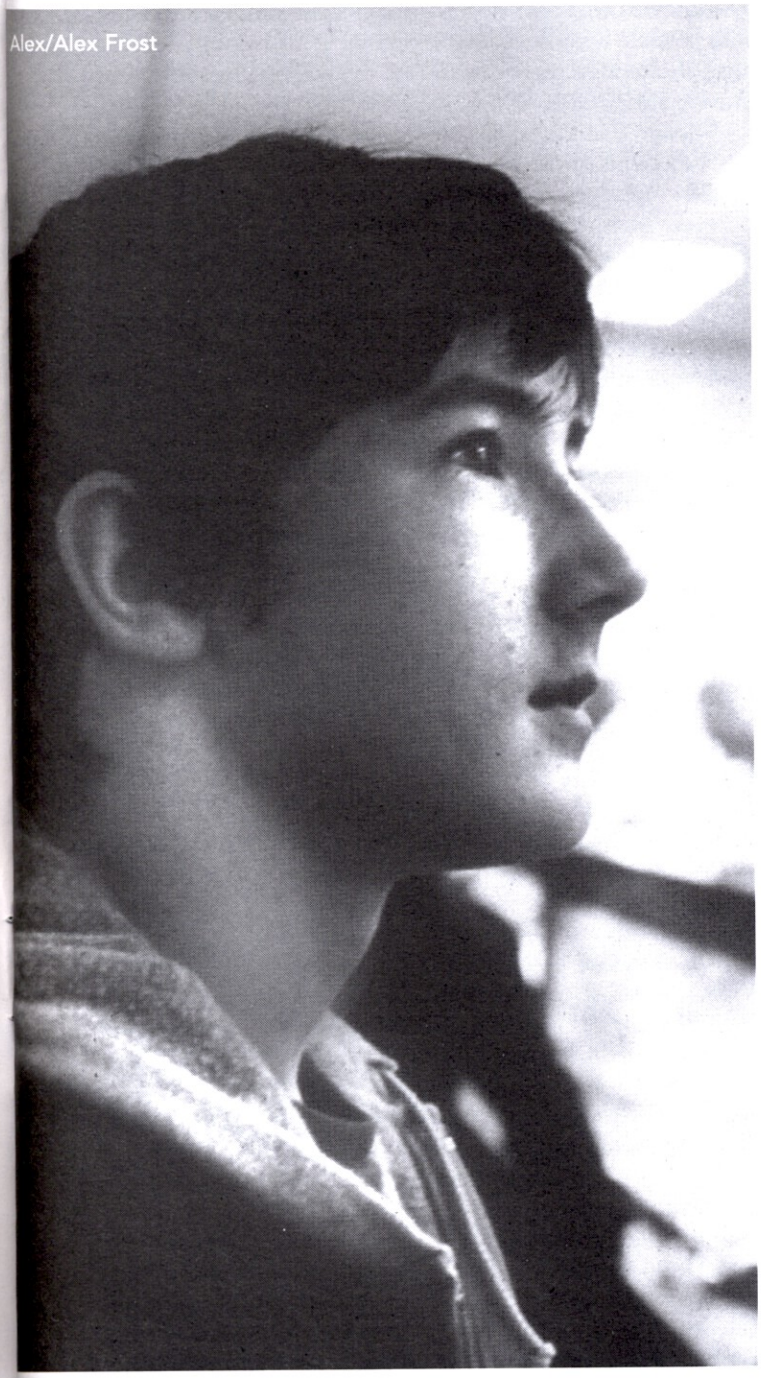
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NOTES

1. For accounts of and commentary on Senator Dole's remarks, see William Claiborne, "Dole Scores Entertainment Industry, Time Warner for 'Debasing' America," *Washington Post*, 1 June 1995, A6; Joe Klein, "Off to the Culture War," *Time* 12 June 1995, pp. 28-29; Richard Lacayo, "Violent Reaction," *Time* 12 June 1995, 24-30; and Bernard Weinraub, "Films and Recordings Threaten Nation's Character, Dole Says," *New York Times* 1 June 1995: A1 and B10.
2. The album featuring "Cop Killer" was released just weeks after the Los Angeles riots and elicited much attention from the press and politicians even though it was selling only moderately when first released. President George Bush described the song as "sick" for glorifying the killing of police officers, while Vice President Dan Quayle labeled the album "obscene" and asked of Time Warner, "Where is the corporate responsibility here?" After several law enforcement organizations threatened to boycott the album and other Time Warner products, a number of the nation's largest record chains refused to stock the album. Time Warner eventually recalled the album and replaced it with a version that did not carry the controversial track. See John W. Mashek, "Bush Intensifies Attack on Violent Rap Music," *Boston Globe*, 30 June 1992, p. 12 and Barry Layne, "Quayle, Black Cops Blast 'Killer,'" *Hollywood Reporter*, 22 June 1992.
3. John M. Broder, "Dole Indicts Hollywood for Debasing Culture," *Los Angeles Times*, 1 June 1995, A1.
4. Ibid, p. A15.
5. Several factors led to the creation of self-regulated censorship in the film industry. The Production Code, although initially written in 1930, was activated in 1934 as a response to a number of factors: increasing pressure by religious groups, including the Catholic Legion of Decency, against immoral content; declining profitability as the worst years of the Depression took hold; and the results of several high-profile studies which outlined film's negative influence on youth. The most important of these, the Payne Fund studies, found that children learned much more about sexual behavior through the movies than through other sources, and supported the claim by many of the religious organizations that movies were corrupting the youth of the nation. The portrayals of sex and violence were both targets of the Production Code, and the limits of what could and could not be shown (or indicated) were significantly affected until the Code's demise in the late 1960s.
6. Richard Lacayo, "Violent Reaction," *Time*, 12 June 1995, p. 30.
7. In 1989, Terry Rakolta, a mother from suburban Detroit, contacted corporations that advertised their products on *Married...With Children* and protested the show's lewd content, particularly since the program was on during the so-called "family hour" of prime-time television. Arguing that programs like *Married...With Children* were "helping to feed our kids a steady diet of gratuitous sex and violence," Rakolta would start a new organization, Americans for Responsible Television, whose goal was to clean up the public airwaves for younger viewers. Under the potential threat of a nation-wide boycott, advertisers like Coca-Cola either removed their commercials entirely from the series or decided on an episode-by-episode basis if they wanted their commercials to air on such controversial programming. See "A Mother Is Heard as Sponsors Abandon a TV Hit," *New York Times*, 2 March 1989, p. A1.
8. Although *Natural Born Killers* was claimed to have inspired several murder sprees, only one of the alleged cases brought Warner Bros. and Oliver Stone to trial as defendants. The family of victim Patsy Ann Byers claimed that killers Sarah Edmondson and Benjamin Darrus were incited to go on a murderous spree after seeing the film. A Louisiana appeals court initially ruled that the Byers family could sue the filmmakers, but the decision was reversed in 2002 when the same court ruled that the film is entitled to the First Amendment protection of free speech. See Janet Shprintz, "Free Speech Ruling May End 'Killers' Case," *Variety*, 7 June 2002, p. 7.
9. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," *Understanding Brecht*, Trans. Anna Bostock, London: NLB, 1973, p. 87.
10. Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, Trans. John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang, 1964, p. 34.
11. Ibid, p. 34.
12. Ibid, p. 34.
13. Ibid, p. 37.
14. Ibid, p. 39.
15. Brecht, "A Little Private Tuition for my Friend Max Gorelik," in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, Trans. John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang, 1964, p. 161.
16. Brecht, "Notes to Die Rundköpfe und Die Spitzköpfe," in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre*, op. cit., p. 101.
17. Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," pp. 100-101.
18. Ibid, p. 98.
19. Ibid, p. 99.
20. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 238.
21. Ibid, pp. 237-238.
22. Dave Laing, "Interpreting Punk Rock," *Marxism Today*, April 1978, p. 126.
23. Ibid, p. 127.
24. Anthony Lane, "The Spy Who Loved Me," *New Yorker*, 25 July 1994, p. 77.
25. Brian Lowry, "'True' Belies Expectations," *Variety*, 11 July 1994, p. 41.
26. Roger Ebert, "True Lies," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 15 July 1994, available at: http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19940715/REVIEWS/407150302/1023
27. Lane, "The Spy Who Loved Me," p. 77.
28. Janet Maslin, "Schwarzenegger as a Walter Mitty with Weapons," *New York Times*, 15 July 1994, p. C1.
29. For example, José Arroyo criticizes the film because "The representation of Arabs reinforces many negative stereotypes. . . .Their function is to be held up for ridicule so the audience can laugh, and even applaud, as they are systematically eliminated." Roger Ebert critiques the strip tease Harry's wife is forced to do as "cruel and not funny," as an example of the film's misogyny. See José Arroyo, "Cameron and the Comic," *Sight and Sound*, September 1994, pp. 27-28 and Ebert, "True Lies."
30. Richard Corliss, "Stone Crazy," *Time*, 29 August 1994, p. 66.
31. Ebert, "Natural Born Killers," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 26 August 1994, available at: http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19940826/REVIEWS/408260302/1023.
32. Todd McCarthy, "Stone's 'Killers' A Bloody Good Show," *Variety* 15 August 1994, p. 45.
33. Jay Carr, "Stone's Age of Savagery," *Boston Globe*, 26 August 1994, p. 51.
34. Maslin, "Young Lovers with a Flaw That Proves Fatal," *New York Times*, 26 August 1994, p. C1.
35. Ebert, "Natural Born Killers." op. cit.
36. Richard Schickel, "No, But He Read the Polls," Time, 12 June 1995, p. 29.
37. "Time Forum: Tough Talk on Entertainment," Time, 12 June 1995, p. 33.
38. Brecht, "The Modern Theater," p. 41. op. cit.

Elephant

The Physics of Violence



Alex/Alex Frost

by Michael Sofair

Most discussion of Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) has presumed it attempts an objective recreation of the 1999 Columbine high school shootings in the U. S., which would suggest the film's deliberate aestheticisation is stylistically inappropriate. *Elephant's* distinctive look and feel leave a strong impression, but thwart insight into its events. The incidental presentation of details that might have been explanatory, such as the student killer's interest in Hitler, can only imply the inadequacy of psychological or sociological accounts of violence without offering an alternative. *Elephant* does not work as documentary, but, equally, it cannot be taken for a conventional narrative film. In place of an overarching story line, it introduces a succession of students who evoke archetypes—the jock, the sensitive boy, the alienated loners, the plain girl, the cold beauty queens—while being barely distinguished as victims and perpetrators. We watch them move through the school's endless maze of corridors engaged in routine activities, until finally we see two more students walking round school, only they are now shooting dead other students.

One way to make sense of this sees *Elephant* as attempting something much stranger than the documentation or fictionalisation of violence. It presents a highly schematic picture, akin to a demonstration in physics, of the school, and by implication the society that sustains it, as a system of bodies in motion. This system is banal and innocuous for the most part, but includes violence as one of its routine modes of operation, continuous with others. This is why there is no real build up to the climactic slaughter, which erupts abruptly without appearing random or unexpected. It is also why *Elephant* appears a triumph of form over substance, for this is the essence of the system it presents: the ostensible content of social life—a collection of individuals who, from motives that are in some sense exogenous, act in interpersonal relations with consequences that can be judged in normative terms—is empty and what is real the form of social life. It should be stressed that though the film eschews individual agency, it does not imply social determinism. Rejecting all reductionism, it exposes the systemic nature of violence in Western societies.

While *Elephant* denies us a secure point of view, the system of bodily interaction which it simulates is not abstract or incomprehensible; its distinctive properties are explored in

the film's meandering, uninsistent development up to the shootings. What seem characters with intentionality reduce to trajectories of motion that cannot be divorced from the physical properties and organisation of the space in which they occur. The long takes which painstakingly observe each such trajectory instil a sense they carry some particular symbolism we must decipher. However, such readings are frustrated by their visual depiction in scenes which go on and on, and finally dissipate in motion whose prolongation exhausts all potential meanings. In this way, *Elephant* suggests a series of particular explanations for violence and then drains them of significance. Our awareness is reduced to a sense of incessant animation and omnipresent isolation, of bodies in circulation with other bodies, but not in communication, caught up in interactions that overwhelm the autonomy of private lives without allowing a sustainable collective life.

Ultimately, the film's style leaves us with simply motion itself, flowing in a physical system rather than a signifying order, an economy of activity that is uncharacterisable without being mysterious. The continuous movement which *Elephant* tracks does not quite exhaust all signification, only that of definitive symbolism and sustained narrative, in favour of another kind, implication in a field. The trajectories of motion into which the film's characters dissolve reveal dimensions in which the space of *Elephant's* school can be mapped, axes along which its movement toward violence can be co-ordinated and thought. Axes that might be categorised as psychosexual, moral and political can be identified, each offering a way to conceive violence, although their particular meaning is less important—and less clear—than their interdependence. What emerges as fundamental to understanding the violence of *Elephant* is the physics of bodies that rules in the space of the school.

This reflects, in part, one stylistic influence on the film, Hungarian director Béla Tarr, and in particular his *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000), set in an unnamed central European town which becomes progressively unhinged following the arrival of a mysterious circus that puts on display the corpse of a whale. Like Van Sant's, Tarr's camera follows his characters' everyday activity until a sudden, unexplained eruption of violence which remains continuous with the ambient motion that precedes it. Though the setting is obviously different, *Elephant* is virtually the same film in form and theme, depicting an intrinsically violent social organisation in terms of a system of interacting motion, and using the same style to frustrate conventional understanding and judgement.

Mention is often made of *Elephant's* title alluding to Alan Clarke's eponymous 1989 television documentary on IRA violence.[1] Violence as the elephant in the room we all see and choose to ignore because it is too huge to acknowledge or master. *Werckmeister's* beached whale suggests another animal metaphor for the violence in *Elephant*: our social life is ordered around a central and intractable dead weight of materiality, which generates an irreducible antagonism manifest in ways that inevitably extend to violence. The implications of *Elephant's* systemic approach to violence are left to us to think through. One is that moral schematisation is, if inevitable, also irrelevant. Yet the film's "physics" proves consistent with an ethics of action to deal with violence.

Elephant's Refusal to Characterise or Narrativise Violence

An initial point of entry is to examine *Elephant's* minimal explicit narrative content for explanations of its violence. The scenes involving Eric and Alex, the two boys who carry out the slaughter, seem at first sight to offer in a few eloquent images the sort of characterisation and motive that would normally take half a narrative film to develop: their routine dysfunctionality, with Eric moronically rapt in a shooting videogame played to Alex's classical piano piece that might recall quiet musical lunatics from countless other films; their harried, harrying yet disinterested parents in a breakfast scene; their fascination with Nazism nurtured through a History Channel-type documentary; their stunted sexuality, and possible homosexuality, expressed in an awkward, unwitting chaste kiss; their easy access to weapons in the age of Amazon and FedEx—Click, sign and shoot.

Though Van Sant did intend some of this to be explanatory, such as his implication of the demonstration effect of television violence, it is proffered with a "round up the usual suspects" perfunctoriness in scenes that actually vitiate every insight they appear to offer.[2] While the boys are watching the Hitler documentary, Eric asks a stream of questions such as "That's Hitler, right?" apparently uncertain of history's most familiar face, and receives apathetic monosyllabic answers from Alex. It is as if they have assumed a kind of logic, beginning with a sense their impulses are bad, from which it follows they must be bad, and therefore like other bad people, among whom was that Hitler dude. Interpolation of a caricature evil persona is facilitated by the imagery which pours out of the popular media divorced from context and becomes framed in terms of the Manicheanism left over from traditional religion, but all this does not explain why the boys have adopted this logic, it only begs the question.

Similarly, the kiss comes out of nowhere with no motive beyond idle curiosity (one boy saying "I've never kissed anybody") and no consequence, rendering any exploration of psychosexual pathology gratuitous. Change the sex or sexual orientation and one can imagine these characters just the same. At the end of the killing spree, Alex shoots Eric, which may be the last act of the closet case who must erase all the evidence, but is more simply the conclusion of the path the boys are on, which has them kill without identifiable limit, end or reason.

Not only are specific explanations of the boys' actions vitiated by their presentation, but they tend to coalesce and blur, with for instance, the Hitler documentary only filling in time while the boys wait for their guns to be delivered, when it is promptly abandoned. This creates a sense of an interlocking network of causal forces at work, while at the same time denying us clear articulation of it.

Similar complications dog attempts to treat the other students as conventional characters. Elias, who has moved round school photographing everything in sight, snaps Eric and Alex just before they shoot him. He might be read as hiding behind his camera, using it to mediate between a fragile self and hard, hostile world, to keep its violence at one remove. Enacting such a defence mechanism at the moment

of his death, when it is exposed as ineffectual, might confirm its neurotic basis, except that Elias does not seem depressed or broken in any way. He just maintains the course he is set on when the film opens, accumulating random photos intent on building up a "portfolio" to start a career, as if, absent a unifying perspective, they—and he—will acquire coherence once they find a market. If this is a critique of the blunted, commercialised subjectivity of the culture of the image, it is one cut loose from explicit context. *Elephant* forces us to recognise that we actually bring such readings to it, reminding us they are as much thoughts about our world as the film's.

Initially, the absence of expected patterns of characterisation gives minor details weight. We almost read character off a tee-shirt: the French "Triomphe" on Alex's, partially obscured by his jacket, might signal secret pretension, difference and even deviance, while a jock's red "Lifeguard" top can suggest a narcissistic proclamation of physical competence that also identifies him as a target, marked out in the large cross on his back. It is a mistake to take these signs as economical ways of conveying backstory. The film's style holds us to its surface, so that the temptation to read significance into the tee-shirts, rather than opening up hidden depths in its characters, only makes apparent that what we expect to find in them is lacking.

In this, *Elephant* builds on Van Sant's previous film, *Gerry* (2002), which similarly tracked the largely wordless, actionless movement of its characters, both named Gerry, to climax in sudden violence as one Gerry killed the other. Only in two fleeting instants did the film appear to characterise the Gerrys as distinct individuals, when one recounted an anecdote about a television game show, and the other recalled a fantasy role-playing game. Yet the substance of their "personality" was just the standardised content of consciousness in a commodified culture and failed to individuate them.

Similarly, the tee-shirts in *Elephant* reveal not the particularity of character or personal identity but its absence, and in a way that relates this to media or image culture as its context (but not definitive cause) and to violence as its effect. The final remark of Alex to Eric as they embark on their shooting spree, "Have fun," adopts, even as it mocks, the easy, empty *bonhomie* of the other students, implying a similar violent potential may be contained in their dude-speak exchanges. This potential cannot be related to some experience of loss of self, because that is an existential condition which appears, like much everything else, not to be felt at all by the students.

What most powerfully exposes characterisation and narrative as irrelevant in *Elephant* is the film's style. The strangeness of the framing is apparent from the opening shot, in which the camera slowly drops from an elevated perspective to follow the movement of a car from behind. This explicit descent seems to renounce an initial transcendent position and almost dutifully fall into line behind the characters in the car. It makes us aware that what we see is framed, offered to a gaze that is situated, even as it denies us an expected stable perspective.

Following this beginning, the camera is usually positioned behind a student, a framing which is most apparent in shots of Alex, as if to suggest he is somehow other and unknowable, though its use for other students generalises this impression to frustrate identification with them all. Shot / reverse shot is eschewed for dialogues, in favour of the almost random alignment of bodies in a common field. The camera moves fluidly to locate each character in the image so that we see what they see, and see them seeing it, making their point of view visible as local and contingent. Each student is implicated in a particular location that is shown as just one among many by the film's shifting between characters, following one then another according to a non-linear arrangement of diegetic time in which paths cross and criss-cross in space and time.

One might see an analogy to contemporary social organisation in the way *Elephant's* accentuated isolation of individual bodies is concurrent with a deindividuation of character, but more fundamentally, it reveals how much we depend on the contingency of traditional framing arrangements not just to identify with a character, but to identify them as a character. It also undermines an understanding of the film's violence in terms of relations between individual agents.

The result is to present the school as a world from which the students cannot be divorced, almost as if it were an organism and they its organs. Initially, its life seems ideal. The school is relatively well-equipped and affluent, its administration reasonably tolerant without shirking the hard work of education, to the extent that students are still taught physics. They seem well-adjusted, and we see shared jokes and pleasures. Then come minor signs of something amiss—bullying, bitchiness, bulimia, a boy quietly sobbing. There is recurring visual depiction of this sense of an idealised world which is false: the long, glass-lined corridors are for the most part open and sunlit, but occasionally admit shadows of window frames and supports which fall across the space and those within like bars, reminding us this school is closed off, confined and confining. Lurid blues and oranges, particularly noticeable in the shooting sequences, are distortions of natural light in a denaturalised institutional setting which achieve an effect that is not expressionistic, of a field coloured with inhuman emotions that inhere in the space itself rather than arise in personal reaction to it.

At the same time, there is in all this no suggestion of some darker truth, that, beyond the facade, the school is sadistic and cruel. Rather, the camera sedately explores an environment which does not tell a story, cannot be given clear moral characterisation and does not arouse strong feelings, while implicating us in it through the meticulous accumulation of detail impressed in long scenes wending corridor after corridor. A presumption of objectivity is denied as much as identification with a character's subjective point of view. The camera becomes identified with the entire field which it views, while characters are defined by their movement, which can only be understood in relation to other such lines of movement.

Trajectories Of Movement and Meaning Ending In Violence

The clearest example of this, and also of how motion exhausts meaning while evoking the systemic features of social interaction, is the near-endless tracking shot of Nathan. It begins in a field where he is playing touch football with

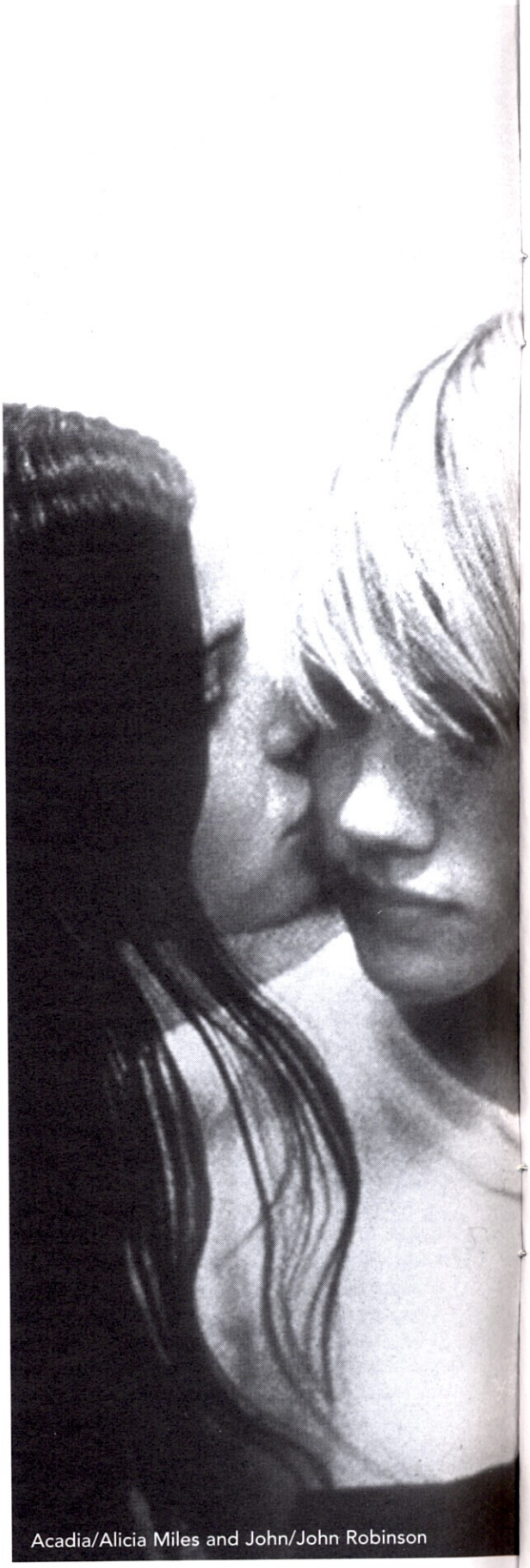
other jocks, who are similarly dressed in meticulously casual fashion, as if their game is as much about conformist display as sport. From the field, the camera tracks him into the school, up the stairs and along corridors in an uninterrupted flow which passes some admiring girls, until he finally arrives at Carrie, his girlfriend. Considered in isolation, this sequence traces out a kind of line of desire which runs from the training of the male body through to heterosexual relations. It is a line that excludes Eric and Alex but joins several of their victims. First, we see the male body in a contact with other male bodies that is ordered and regulated as a game. The body is set in motion as an object of visual desire for the girls, to whom it imparts the "heat" built up in the game's moderated, sociable violence. The body comes to rest as part of a heterosexual couple, given a name and identified as a unit in the intertitle "Nathan and Carrie."

If Nathan's course is a locus of desire which marks out desiring subjects and objects, it is one made to appear, through the overlong scene dramatised by a classical musical score, excessive, just a little too insistent, and somehow as a result, too slight and insubstantial to persist in time or thought. This is not the only case where the excess of visual representation of a potential symbol or narrative line drains it of significance. However, when Nathan's path is related to those of other students, it exposes an extensive psychosexual order to movement in the school, and to its violent climax. This does not amount to a network of repressed desire, because these characters' inner lives are untheorisable and hypothetical. Further, it is not some layer of meaning independent of, and supervening on, the student's movement, but a way of identifying regularities in that movement. And it is not the only way; taken in conjunction, they implicate the film's characters in a system without favouring a particular reading of it.

Eric and Alex are also named together in an intertitle, suggesting them as a kind of anti-couple to Nathan and Carrie. The relations between the two pairs are primarily non-narrative. The Beethoven sonata which we have heard accompany Nathan's walk is later played by Alex in a scene set in his bedroom. This associates him with the Nathan's trail of desire, as if what Alex wants and dreams through his music is Nathan, reinforcing the suggestion of his homosexual desire, though it also means Nathan moves unconsciously to Alex's music. What comes to Alex in this music is not Nathan but Eric in his place, who taps on Alex's window and is let into his room. The video game Eric proceeds to play alone counterpoints the football game from which both boys were excluded.

This scene might be related to Nathan in other ways. When first heard accompanying Nathan's walk, the Beethoven sonata moderates and outlasts a series of intrusive alien sounds, inhuman distortions of student's voices coming out of rooms and eerie metallic echoes reverberating in the corridor. That we see Alex losing himself in the same sonata as soon as he gets home might be seen as an attempt to similarly assuage the after-effects of the same alienating clangour that pervades the school. This would mean his piano playing, along with his possible sensory disturbance—he seems, for instance, disoriented by a kind of auditory hallucination in the cafeteria and peers around with a strange, altered gaze—are not symptoms of private madness but of objective properties of the school environment to which he is more attuned than others.

The movement of yet another student, Acadia, can also relate to Nathan's, though the two never meet. She kisses a crying boy and, though we cannot be sure of the relation between them, it seems platonic. Acadia moves on to join a meeting of the Gay-Straight Alliance group. They sit talking as the camera pans around their circle from a position within it. The lengthy and pronounced orbital movement contrasts with Nathan's equally lengthy, pronounced rectilinear movement tracing the straight line on which girls and boys fall. Not a trajectory, the circular traversal presents a situation outside that line, identifying it as lacking something. The unmotivated kindness of



Acadia/Alicia Miles and John/John Robinson

Acadia's kiss stands apart from standardised, exclusive heterosexual desire, whose competitiveness and display may reflect an inherent coldness, even violence. (We do learn that Carrie slapped another girl whom she caught Nathan looking at, and we see Nathan set another boy against Alex during class.)

Eric and Alex cannot identify themselves in this sexual ordering of the school. They do not quite fall on the straight line, but cannot face moving in the sexually inclusive circle. Acadia's kiss contrasts with the boys', in that their's excludes and isolates them, from others and each other. Yet as Alex plays the sonata, the camera pans around his room and its prosaic boyish untidiness to present it to us in the same circular orbit as Acadia's group. This may suggest viewing Alex as being in some way like Acadia and her sexually diverse group, and that his inchoate desire might have been realised in another way, not if he had been different, but if he had been located differently in the "psychosexual space" of the school.

John stands outside this network of desire, tracing another kind of line, which might be called that of the good son. The film opens with him having to drive himself to school because his father is drunk. This father could symbolise a burnt-out older generation, or an entire society, that has given rise to the film's undirected, vacuous teens, and is insensate, not responsible and unable to face the world it has made. (Van Sant does say his generation's lurch from 60s counter-culture to 00s ultra-conservatism "must shoulder part of the blame."[3]) As John drives, father suggests they go hunting using the rifle grandfather brought back from Tobruk. John doesn't know where that is, his father explains its place in World War Two, seeming incredulous of his son's ignorance, then defensive when John shoots back "You've been there, right?" The reference to hunting identifies the kind of violence that is part of the line of fathers and sons, where it is accepted and subsumed in a tradition, one to which John cannot relate and to which his father presumes a relation which is not there.

Adding resonance to this father-son pair is a faint suggestion of religious symbolism. Here is an exhausted father whose world needs to be redeemed, perhaps by his son, who does appear for a while as if he might be the film's central actor. John moves around school decked out like a Joseph Campbell-style Hero in his bright yellow tee-shirt, with its bull motif that suggests strength—and one haplessly led into an arena to face death. He is almost, but ultimately not at all, the Son: Innocent, with a word of comfort for everyone and a hurt he bears alone (John, the only character who shows any real feelings, is the boy who breaks into tears, presumably overcome by the pressures on him), he also brings a message, as the one student to warn others after seeing Eric and Alex arrive loaded up with weapons. He might have warned everyone but for his father, who has by now wandered off and must be found, as if this explains the son's failure to redeem. Of course, John is overwhelmed like everyone else by the mayhem that is the definitive realisation of a society on autopilot, one in which a narrative of redemption through individual action gets lost.

What John's path traces out is perhaps the very possibility of reading the film in terms of such a narrative ordered round a central character, and of moral navigation of its world through him. This possibility settles on what is its default setting in our culture, being organised around the conventional male subject, through whom we might have read a story with an inter-generational dynamic, the son's generation having to take on the role of the father's and maintain their peace, and understood its characters through a psychology that took the father-son relation as its norm and identified violence with deviation from it. John is clearly much too insubstantial to carry this weight and his meandering quickly loses significance, blending into the generalised activity of the student body.

There is a final dimension of signification attaching to the routine of the school and its violence, which could be described as political. It cannot be traced through a single character but through differences between them which remain implicit. The school cleaners conspicuously fail to notice Eric and Alex moving through the corridors with their assault weapons in the same way that earlier in the film, the cafeteria staff are treated as invisible by the students, including Alex. These instances align as a hint of something like class difference, the separation of those who work and those who consume. There is no conflict between these two groups, rather, they move in worlds which are non-communicating yet co-extensive.

Another politically charged vector, race, defines the path of Benny, the only black student, which is more brutally truncated than that of the others. He is not even identified by name until after the shooting begins, and is the only student who remains inside the school by choice, calmly helping others. Benny even approaches Eric to reason with him, and is shot dead for his trouble. He wears yellow, like the good white boy, John, who also tries and fails to help, but from outside, removed from the violence. Distinguishing Benny by race is inescapable, given this is all that identifies him.

Class and racial difference give the organisation of movement in the school a political dimension that is overlaid with, but does not explicitly relate to, the psychosexual (made visible in the paths of Nathan and Acadia) and the moral (which can be traced through John and his father). Once we move from attempting to read the meaning of isolated lines of movement to mapping the space in which it occurs, the course of all the characters can be located in a common field. This is true of Michelle, the plain girl who starts out jogging with the other girls, stops to stare distractedly into the overcast sky and ends up running alone and last along the blank wall of a building to reach the now deserted gym. Her pressured and solitary path is recognisably the fate of at least a few students in any school. As the element that does not belong, her presence completes the picture. However, Michelle fails to signify in terms of the dimensions of the school space identified so far, reinforcing the point that these are not the only ways to characterise that space, nor is any significance they appear to carry necessary. Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider how violence emerges in terms of these dimensions before attempting to relate it directly to the school conceived as a physical or material system.

Mapping The Dimensions of Violence

When we see Eric and Alex drive off to school to massacre, this can relate to another duo driving off, the father-son pair that opens the film. The dutiful son who takes up his father's position gives way to a kind of Primal Horde of two, effectively fatherless and bound together in a desire that appears homoerotic as it cuts across the symbolic order that relates males as father and son.

Eric and Alex's movement through school also relates to the heterosexual trajectory traced out by Nathan. It concludes with the same couple, Nathan and Carrie, whom Alex appears intent on shooting, although we do not actually see this happen. That the couple are hiding in a freezer, having retreated there from the cooler, is an ironic visual pun, for we have seen behind this couple's cool image a coldness toward others. From hiding in "cool," they move to the freezer to isolate and preserve themselves from the Other of wayward male desire, Eric and Alex. Yet hiding only locates them as its limit, as what it is set against, resulting in them being exposed and made its object in the climax of its violence.

Exposure is the conclusion of the line traced by Nathan, though it seemed to bring him within from without (inside the school from the cold outdoors, from the fluid competition of the football field into definition as a couple.) It is also the conclusion of the line of the killer boys, which takes them out of, and makes them Other to, the school. This play of reversals of inside and outside reveals these positions as relative and transient, effects of the configuration of the overall system and one's position in it, so that any identity based on them must be arbitrary and unstable.

Alex's confrontation of Nathan and Carrie also relates to the lines of other students. The film began with Elias "shooting" a couple with his camera, and ends with Alex seemingly about to shoot one. Both boys move in a system of social relations mediated through instruments (guns as much as cameras) and run almost inevitably into the couple because of its ubiquity which, for Alex, becomes intolerable.

Alex's exposure of the couple also culminates movement in the political dimension of the school. He sings a nursery rhyme as if toying with which to shoot first: "Eenie, meenie, minie, mo / Catch a tiger by the toe / If he hollers, let him go..." Older generations have grown up with another, odious word, "nigger," which the anodyne "tiger" has replaced. The sanitisation of speech, whether through the demands of political correctness or the more overt coercion of right-wing censorship, seems not to change behaviour, only the signification attached to it. What the rhyme's racist pedigree shares with the events of *Elephant* is a common form which organises social relations to which violence is intrinsic.

If the school is mapped in terms of its violence, the "elephant" at its centre is the violence of the unsocialised male couple against the heterosexual couple. Abstracting from the particular content, its form is the violence of the excluded against the included. Given *Elephant's* film style and its lack of narrative, this cannot be understood as the responsibility or choice of the excluded, or even the included, but as an effect of a system organised according to a logic of inclusion / exclusion. This logic is what is common to all dimensions of the school's space, and of our society, not just the psychosexual, but the political, whose fundamental is the division into those with capital and those without, and of the traditional moral order, which divides us into good and bad according to conformity or non-conformity to prescribed identities.

The Physics Of Bodies In Motion

Characterising *Elephant's* system of bodies in motion as a physics is a possibility implied in the film itself, in a scene set in a physics class. The teacher talks of electrons being displaced away from the nucleus, "jumping" from one orbital to another further out with higher energy, when the amount of energy in an atom is increased. The extra energy does not remain but is discharged as light, with the electron dropping back into a low energy state. A systemic relation between increased distance and heightened energy might describe, in very abstract terms, Eric and Alex's "jump" in position within the school, their isolation and the antagonistic "energy" it generates and releases.

Something of *Elephant's* physics is revealed by the way its patient study of movement through corridors recalls Frederick Wiseman's *High School* (1968) or *Hospital* (1970), only to expose obvious differences: *Elephant's* corridors are usually isolated and still; traversed alone, they do not connect, but simply permit the movement which they channel. The difference may just reflect that Van Sant modelled the school on his experience playing *Tomb Raider*.[4] Still, a kind of abstracted emptiness sets *Elephant* apart from the American life Wiseman showed, with inchoate talk replaced by lonely silences and standardised banter, contiguous dramatic event by monotone movement and sudden violence. Wiseman's observation of the interlocking fields of public institutions contrasts with their absence in Van Sant's film.

It is tempting to conceive these contrasts as giving representation to a change in social life caused by the reorganisation of capitalism in the last thirty years into a less coordinated but more pervasive form, which orders without regulating. *Elephant* can be read as an allegory in these terms, with violence an effect of the anonymising commodification of personal identity and reduction of ever more patterns of meaning and behaviour to abstract exchanges. That this can be summarised in terms of the physics lesson—an intensification of capital accumulation, the "energy," of capitalism, results in social displacement and increased antagonism—reminds us this dynamic is as much physical or material as social.

The physics that rules in *Elephant* also prevails in our social spaces, the depersonalised and denaturalised interior worlds of shopping malls, or increasingly regimented street spaces, whose physical organisation resembles that of the school. More elusive is the instrumentalisation of the spaces in which we move, the way they subtly encourage bodies to interact in instrumental rather than organic terms. These properties do not have a direct cause-effect relation to violence, rather they facilitate a certain way of being which carries over into violence. In a similar way, suicides in Bresson's films such as *Une Femme Douce* (1969) or *The Devil, Probably* (1977) may be explained by their situation in a milieu which reduces life to

mechanics, evoked by long scenes of characters performing mechanical tasks, which *Elephant* also offers.

Though the film seems to relate features of capitalism to violence, it does not advance a particular politics. Rather, it drives us to analyse the form of contemporary experience. Ultimately, the motion it tracks does not so much represent or allegorise society as seem to be a replication or simulation of it. We see society shed of our fantasy projections of it as a symbolic order that stands for some ideal which we imagine it realising or failing to realise. This is why *Elephant* is better thought of as proposing a physics, rather than a politics, of violence. However, the way in which it is filmed suggests aligning it with those theories in physics that do not make naive claims to objectivity. In particular, two fundamental aspects conform to the theory of relativity.

First, in the way the film's time line loops back as it traces each student's movement in succession as we approach the massacre. Each seems complete, then unexpectedly resumes when the shootings commence and moves on to a conclusion that forces us to think of it as issuing in a violence that is part of, and not outside, that student's story. One effect is a sense of inevitability or fatalism, as if these characters are carried forward toward an event beyond their control and somehow necessary. A more interesting effect is to convey a sense of time as a medium in which we are defined, rather than through which we move, like space-time in relativity theory.

The second relativity-like feature is that, as each character's path unfolds in succession, we see moments when they intersect recur from different perspectives so that, considered in itself, each appears partial and inadequate without making the "reality" of the school subjective. In one example of these repetitions, Elias tells John when they meet in a corridor that he won't be going to a concert because his parents are "being bitches." We see this meeting from each of their perspectives, then again, from that of an outsider, Michelle. However, she does not have an "objective" view. Running because she is late, she only sees Elias take John's picture and so has the distorted perspective we might expect of the overlooked nice plain girl, glimpsing a world of image and boys from which she is excluded. Her's is not a bias produced by bitterness or self-pity; it is a function of her position in the system, which she views as she does because that is how it appears to her.

The consequence of these similarities to relativity theory is that *Elephant* identifies its characters with the sequence of positions they occupy as bodies through time, taken as a whole. They may appear to have an independent inertia or momentum, but it is actually a property of the overall system of motion, whose appearance is contingent on particular points of view. This is not consistent with the cause and effect of explanation set in linear time. Instead, bodies have a givenness which is immutable, though not unthinkable. Identity does not develop beyond one's place(s) in the system, yet is not reducible to it. Individual and environment form a whole, a kind of Gestalt of the personal in the social, of the body in the space, neither of which can be specified independent of the other.

Considering violence in these terms can free us from the extremes of viewing ourselves as private individuals facing other individuals who are inherently violent, or as passive constructions of impersonal forces that dictate violent outcomes. Further, the resemblance of *Elephant's* approach to physics should not be seen as naturalising violence. It actually makes the opposite point, with violence conditional on and relative to the particular system of physical interaction in which it occurs. Change the system and the amount and type of its violence must change. A systemic approach does have the onerous implication that if anything is to change, everything must, though it also means that if we start to act differently, the system is different, the whole changing as its part do. The more determined and organised a system is, the more extensive will be the change in its molar order effected by difference at the molecular level.

Elephant's physics poses a further challenge. If, as the way it is filmed suggests, an independent perspective is unsustainable and we are implicated in a situation of violent interaction, then how are we to decide which changes in such a situation are preferable? We are denied a morality that aims to create a system that is "good" out of one that is "bad", though the tendency to moralise is usually a reflection of the absence of a capacity to analyse. And moralising has yet to get beyond the naive ambition of remaking all violent individuals into non-violent, or the self-contradictory goal of taking over society to impose non-violence. It may even be considered part of the system of violence, producing an "us" vs "them" mentality in which "they" are unthinkable and unnegotiable that sustains cycles of violence and counter-violence.

Frustrating moral judgement opens the way to an alternative (one that is outside the scope of the film): to think in terms of an ethics of better versus worse outcomes. However, if violence is considered in systemic terms, we cannot discriminate between the random violence of atomised individuals, the abstract violence of corporate capitalism or the legalised violence of the state. None can be considered fundamental, as the cause or "true" nature of violence, and relying on one as a force to control or "defeat" the others can only produce an internal reconfiguration of the system and redistribution of its violence.

Elephant's closing sequence of the sky clouding over is almost identical to its opening one. Only the ambient bustle of student voices has been silenced, making audible a background confusion of distorted natural and unnatural sounds whose harmonies join with the Beethoven sonata, which is now extradiegetic, unleashed from Alex's assigned place in the school. What is constant in both opening and closing images is the flow of clouds streaming in constant change, one with the sky in a movement that is, like that of the students who have passed through the school, amorphous yet material and systematic, and ever ready to modulate into violent discharge.

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NOTES

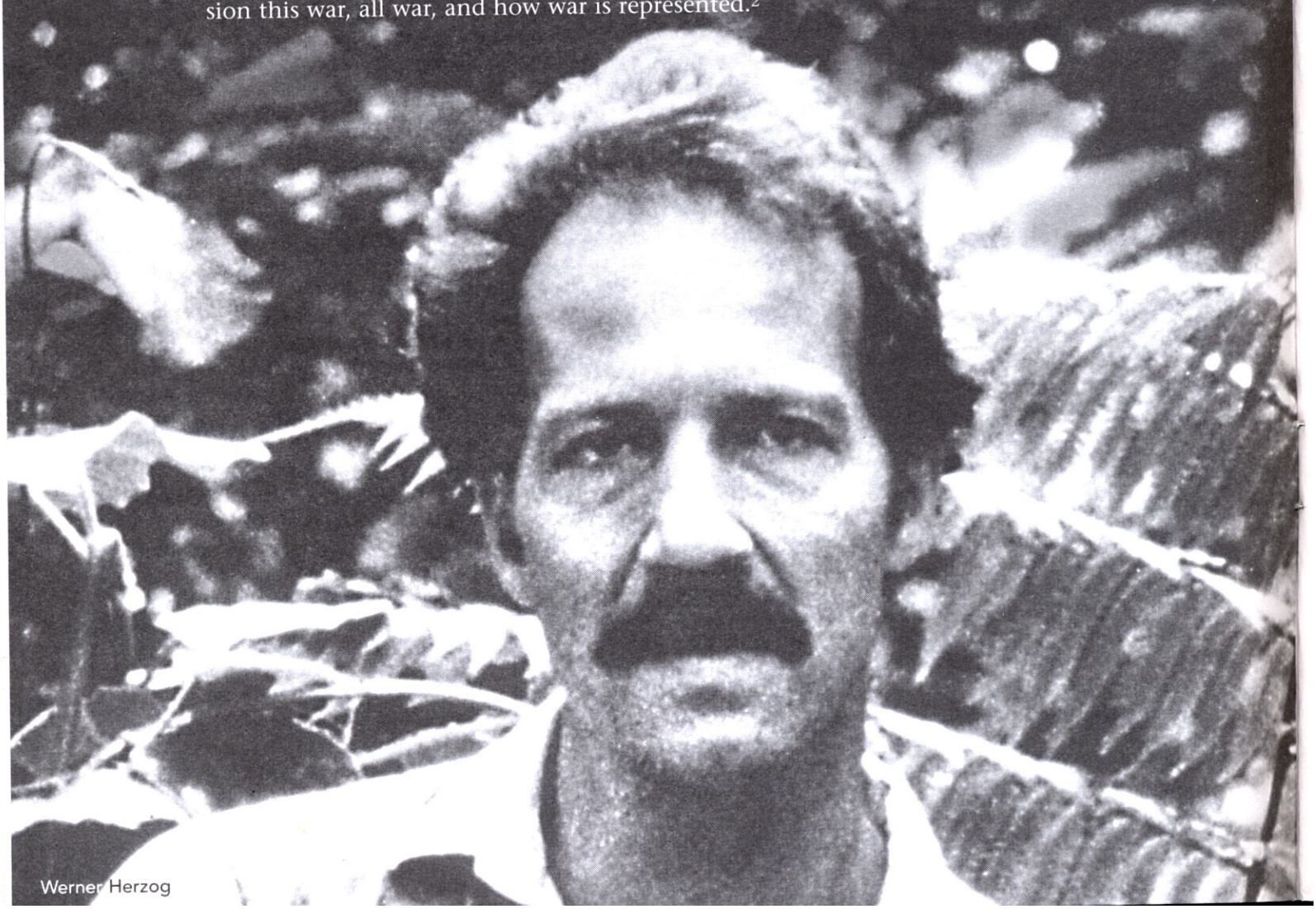
1. See for instance Sophi Moore, "Elephant," *Film Quarterly*, 58.2, Winter 2004–5, p. 45
2. *The Australian*, Wednesday, March 24, 2004, p. 12
3. ibid, p. 12
4. ibid, p. 12

Firepower

Herzog's Pure Cinema a

I. Firepower

At the ostensible conclusion of 1991's Operation Desert Storm, the US's intangible, informational combat mission which time has only recently designated Gulf War I, CNN's real-time coverage of the events made a constant spectacle of the blazing infernos that were laying waste to as many as 500 Kuwaiti oil fields. In an interview about the making of his cine-essay *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), Werner Herzog notes that CNN's coverage of the fires over-saturated public consciousness and disempowered the disaster. Psychic effects rendered fleeting, momentary, and soon enough forgotten, their consistently "tabloid" depiction saw television viewers become "dangerously inured" to the war's horrific images of environmental devastation.[1] Struck as much by the grandiosity of the fires as he was by the public's inert reaction, Herzog set out not only to record this "momentous event for the memory of mankind," but also to stylize it in a way that would challenge the viewer to revision this war, all war, and how war is represented.[2]



Werner Herzog

as the Internal Combustion of War

by Nadia Bozak

Grounded in a rhetoric of cool meditative reserve, Herzog's resultant cine-essay depicts the invasion of Kuwait in a future tense, as a wound about to burst rather than one already healed up and scarred over. Through an ironic quasi-documentary style which situates the landscape and its natural resources as the subject and object of military aggression, *Lessons of Darkness* argues for the environment as the cause of combat and its most overlooked victim. Important to note is that the film is not "about" Kuwait in 1991; *Lessons of Darkness* decidedly conceals the invasion within the conceit of a science-fictional document, one that pretends to be an objective account of an unnamed planet's apocalyptic finale. Herzog's film is as radical and iconoclastic an essay as Theodor Adorno imagined the form could possibly be. Neither fact nor fiction, document or narrative, the film obeys only its own internal logic, and so is inherently, insistently, self-reflexive. The tension of *Lessons of Darkness* is grounded not only in the damning subtlety of its argumentation, but also in its conscious refusal to identify, first, its Desert Storm context, and second, to concede to any model of generic classification beyond a typically Herzogian topographical resistance.

"Firepower" is a structuring metaphor that can be simultaneously drawn out of *Lessons of Darkness* and also used to frame the film. The duplicity of "firepower", the weaponry of the visual, is a fruitful way to conceptualize the crisis of representation implicit in any cinematic critique of war, wherein the aesthetic, rhetorical, and strategic distinctions between subject and object, theme and theory, shooter, shot, and stock are ultimately collapsed. Drawing upon Theodor Adorno's thoughts on the essay form, *Lessons of Darkness* is regarded here as a cinematic essay, one that situates Herzog both in direct opposition to the idea of "firepower" and as its most engaging practitioner. In *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, Paul Virilio articulates what this paper understands as "Firepower": "To fell the enemy is not so much to capture as to captivate him."[3] The complexity of all this, however, is that Virilio's subtle phrase applies not only to Desert Storm, Iraqi forces, and CNN, and but also to Herzog's contentious *Lessons of Darkness*, a film as spectacular and incendiary as the war it sets out to challenge.

Iraqi soldiers retreating from Kuwait used fire to wage ecological warfare and thus sabotage the enemy's resource-based economy, but also as a spectacle, a visual weapon with which to batter the psyches of the opposition. According to Virilio, "war can never break free from the magical spectacle because its very purpose is to produce that spectacle...the force of arms is not brute force but spiritual force."[4] While the coalition forces relied on a touchless, groundless, informational war, automated electronically and from afar, fire-as-power was Iraq's mode of spectacular violence and a last-ditch gesture of aggression. Rather than firing bullets, Iraq's "firepower" polluted Kuwait's environment, destabilized its economy, and it likewise presented a dangerous—and annoying—challenge to Coalition forces who assembled specialized crews to put out the blazes. But the intended potency of Iraqi firepower was undermined as the CNN-dominated media bombarded the viewing public with accounts of the enemy's senseless environmental aggression, such that although Iraqi troops were behind the images, they ceded their control once the enemy's news service framed the fires to its own advantage. As Virilio notes, a battle is controlled by that side which also is in control of its image:[5] the public became habituated to Persian Gulf coverage and the effectiveness of the fires as psychic weaponry ultimately expired.

The duplicity of firepower is both the subject and the matter, the means and the ends, of Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness*. Assuming a stance as reserved as Desert Storm's military strategy, Herzog reconceptualizes and reshapes the spectacle that was consuming Kuwait's oil reserves, sharpening fire back into a weapon that refuses to fight on behalf of any specific side. Such is the ambiguity of *Lessons of Darkness*. Its operative is to disguise itself, making its motives as stealthy as the coalition's weaponry, smuggling into the documentary form a condemnation, not of Iraq, CNN or the coalition forces, but of the viewing public's easy ingestion of brutal imagery,

unexpectedly challenging audiences to remember the power of the fire that burned Kuwait, wasted the world's oil and polluted its atmosphere in turn.

Firepower is not only a metaphor for the perception of warfare, but also for the hybridized ambiguity that characterizes the essay as form, for it becomes embroiled within the fabric of its own critique, built into the rhetoric of that very enterprise which it sets out to condemn. Firepower is an analytical apparatus that works to enhance, draw out, inform, and be informed by the subject of analysis as well as the analysis itself. An inherently transgressive text, *Lessons of Darkness* is thus a critique of vision and visuality, of cinematic enactment and representation, of the duplicity of the image, the insufficiency of language, the necessity of the essay not just to consider its subject, but to consume it, digest and thus disarm it. *Lessons of Darkness* is a vision as much as it is a reflection; not only of the future, present or past, but of its own evanescent self.

II. The Extraterrestrial Essayist

Herzog's omniscient narration and omnivoyant camera tells of some planet's future demolition and demise; *Lessons of Darkness* is a science fictional lament for a destroyed planet and its deranged inhabitants. Founded on conflation, confusions, overstepping and transgression, the film is a meditation on the collapse of binary distinctions (good and evil, war and peace, birth and death, Genesis and Apocalypse) and the dissolution of cinematic conventions. Herzog begins with a quote attributed to mystical French philosopher Blaise Pascal: "The collapse of the stellar universe will occur like its creation – in grandiose splendor." Capturing the paradoxical proximity between the beginning of the world and its end, the film's epigraph becomes richer still upon learning that Herzog himself is the real author. A case of inverted plagiarism, the pseudo-Pascal prepares the viewer for something more profound than simple documentary. We are in "the realm of poetry,"[6] as Herzog explains. We are also in the realm of the essay. What is immediately at stake, then, is not only *Lessons of Darkness's* thematic meditation on the indivisible nature of birth and death, beauty and horror, pleasure and pain, but how fact and fiction, film and filmmaker are mutually informing, complementary and contradictory, in equal, and unequal parts. Theodor Adorno, in his own essay, "The Essay as Form," argued that the essay is a potentially radical text. With its essential law as "heresy", the essay is capable of eradicating putative opinions, dismantling the icons of orthodox thought, and likewise exposing the symptoms and secrets of established intellectual traditions.[7] But the essay is not radical *a priori*; rather, it is radical—and only then considered an essay in Adorno's sense—when it embraces contradiction, exercising a rhetorical reliance on lies that uses untruth to produce truth.[8] The essay is not solid, but mobile, eschewing its own topography, its dynamic form is internalized as part of its rhetoric. Feeding on the tension between "presentation and matter presented," the essay is necessarily reflective, self-conscious, constructing itself in such a way as to become woven into the fabric of its own theme or topic.[9] Adorno's essay on the essay is itself a demonstration as much as a persuasion, for it is as self-reflective and rhetorically internalized as the form that it describes. The essay ingests, combusts and thus fuels itself on the parts of its whole, the branches and breaches of its own enterprise. As such, Herzog's structuring untruths and contradictions are self-conscious as much as they are self-serving. Daring the viewer to call fact fiction, fiction fact, what is achieved through this rhetoric of untruth is a critical meditation on cinema, on the nature and future of war, on the essay as film form. And never are these discourses made separate or hierarchical, never is one sacrificed on behalf of privileging another; rather, in the spirit of Adorno, Herzog's essay is a constellation, a fine balance composed of inconclusive fragments, a suasion founded on contradiction. The allowance of shifting, sliding imbalance is what makes the essay mobile, innovative, and therefore potentially radical.

The essay, then, as Adorno describes it, is a hybrid. Language is not enough, traditional methods of conceptualization are insufficient, the essay thus is built out of appropriations—conceptual, stylistic, linguistic. Indeed, as critic Philip Lopate imagines the cinematic essay, words and images, fact and fiction are equated, conflated, resulting in visual and topographical heterogeneity, congealed into its own self-sufficient entity.[10] Implicit, or just missed, in his cine-essay guidelines is the crisis of communication that has made the cine-essay a necessary form. The image without the word is insufficient. So too is the word without the image: such is the implication of the cinematic essay, *Lessons of Darkness* especially so, wherein documentary and fiction film are likewise utilized, and equally undermined. A visual, televised war is best dismantled on its own terms. The cine-essay, as Herzog's own demonstrates, is the form which negotiates the crisis of language via images, the crisis of the image via language.

So, conforming to the (pseudo) documentary conceit that glues the film together, the falsified Pascal quote, taken with the filmmaker's intensely self-conscious—and thus ironic—voice-of-God narration, not only evokes a crisis of language, but also a crisis in the visual documentary form. The creation of the stellar universe, the creation of a filmic universe, the creator is the filmmaker, whose subjectivity is not merely embedded in the discourse of his film, it is the film. Not only has war made the landscape disappear into oil floods and conflagration, so too has language evaporated; the film's discourse on sound and silence, language and music thus makes the images more speculative than spectacular. Language, a voice, words of mediation and guidance, that which might contextualize the images of this quasi- documentary, is

consistently sacrificed for silence, privileging instead the sound of the desert's raging blaze. When the expected documentary-style commentary does emerge, it is intrusive, throwing the film into a state of imbalance. Speech is elsewhere garbled, mutated, or else it is muted. Of the Kuwaiti women who are interviewed by the filmmaker, for example, the first has lost her capacity for speech after witnessing the horrific deaths of her sons, while the second speaks on behalf of her small child, gone mute after maltreatment by Iraqi soldiers. Exploiting any available chance to remove the language that would otherwise contextualize the images on screen, the discursive thrust of Herzog's silence does not just privilege the image, but renders it obviously authoritarian, inherently rhetorical. Because its images could not be trusted, "The Gulf War Did Not Take Place," as Jean Baudrillard's famous essay ironically, cynically claimed. In the essays of *Desert Screen*, however, Virilio argues that war and its technologies have always been inseparable from visual perception. The image itself has become a weapon of aggression, not only as a part of the representative apparatus of the news media, but literally, as cameras were built into the coalition's missiles so as to guide them into their targets.[11] When the means of representation (image-based, tele-visual, cinematic) are steeped in skepticism and claims of untruth, critical intervention must become self-reflexive and innovative, recognizing its limitations, and therefore overcoming them, taking up the radical weaponry, the duplicitous firepower, of the essay as form.

From the very first images of "extraterrestrials" (Coalition firefighters) from "some other planet," (ravaged Kuwait) Herzog's science-fictional trope makes literal Adorno's compelling description that sees the essayist as something of an alien. Appropriating conceptual surroundings, groping through a second or third language without a dictionary, the essay works according to accident, error, but also openness, as the practioner is "forced to speak the language instead of piecing it together out of its elements, according to rules."[12] Out of its elements, and out of his element, the essayist, by necessity, by choice or force, is able to innovate. The first chapter of Herzog's film sees the infrastructure of oil production set against the background of sunset that could just as easily be that of dawn. Herzog's voiceover tells us "A planet in our solar system covered in mist. The first creature we encountered tried to communicate something to us." This opening shot sets the precedent for the film's relentless ambiguity—a "figure" dressed in a "space suit", its form defined by the dying light of the sun and likewise obscured by the living light of the oil-well's erupting blaze. The film is extraterrestrial in a literal science-fictional sense, in the foreign-language alienated sense, but also in the militaristic sense, as the Gulf War saw the transition to a groundless, extra-terrestrial war. In a formal sense, too, Herzog's cine-essay is extra-terrestrial, as it transgresses established cinematic borders and territories. And it is literally extraterrestrial: *Lessons of Darkness* was "no-man's-land" filmmaking, for not only was Herzog expelled by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Information, the film stock and crew were in constant danger of being disabled by the raging fires. The earth, then, literally repulses the film crew, while the territory of the country likewise pushes the film away from its soil. The extra-terrestrial film is naturalized by the nature of the extra-terrestrial, groundless war.

The irony of this, however, is that the extra-terrestrial war has reverted back to the terrestrial war. With the reemergence of ground war Virilio's "war at the speed of light" has slowed down, though he argues in *Desert Screen* that we will never decelerate, slowness can never be reinvented.[13] And yet just as we now see a return of the footsoldier, we also see a return to hand-held (digital) technology in film production. The bottom line here is in the bottom line of both Gulf Wars: oil. War's aviation technology is fuelled by something other than the wind beneath the aircraft's wings. Oil facilitated the "speed of light" war as much as energy interests and petro-dollars were its cause: the means and the ends are the same. But with oil resources approaching a state of crisis, fossil fuels becoming increasingly finite, the tempo of war is eased. As opposed to Virilio's contention about the impossibility of deceleration, slowness will be not "reinvented" but rather forced upon us if alternatives to fossil fuel are not discovered, refined, and implemented. Not only is Gulf War II dragging on (and dragging down US forces), but the ground war sees the return of the ambulatory soldier. The suggestion is that oil is becoming too precious to burn—the direct result of the sheer decadence depicted in the final chapter of *Lessons of Darkness* wherein an "alien" (a firefighter) re-ignites the oil fire having just extinguished it, the voiceover claiming that "Life without fire has become unbearable. Now there is something to extinguish, again they can be happy." After a century of wasting oil resources, burning oil as a show of conspicuous consumption, the urgency of Gulf War II is heightened above that of Gulf War I precisely because its tempo has been so radically slowed down. This current war is a dirty war, and once again fought on behalf off fuel securities, but now US forces are willing to dirty their hands and the soles of their feet, soil documents and intelligence dossiers alike. Herzog's portrait of a decadent planet marks the beginning of the fall of warfare, from the air to the earth, from wings to feet, from aerial shots to hand-held cameras to hand-to-hand combat. The disappearance of oil sees the disappearance a mechanized war, ironically ensuring that war is visceral, dirty, grounded: re-territorialized, not de-territorialized.

III. Deterrence as Deference & Pure War as Pure Cinema

A strategy of deterrence: the US military's activity in Gulf War I was disengaged, authoritarian, reliant on spectacle rather than direct confrontation and bears remarkable similarity to the criticism levied at *Lessons of Darkness*. The consensual

accusation was that the filmmaker not only treated the war's events with disturbingly cool objectivity but that he aestheticized Kuwaiti's environmental disaster, rendering ambiguous the divide between the beauty and the horror of the destructive conflagration.[14] But what proved most shocking was the conceit made out of concealing the location as Kuwait, the context as the aftermath of Desert Storm. Instead, the devastation of Kuwait serves as a stunning and convenient background for a consideration of warfare, its future consequences rather than its immediate present. The refusal to identify Kuwait soured the initial reception of *Lessons of Darkness*, but it has likewise ensured its ultimate survival up to the present, and into the future.

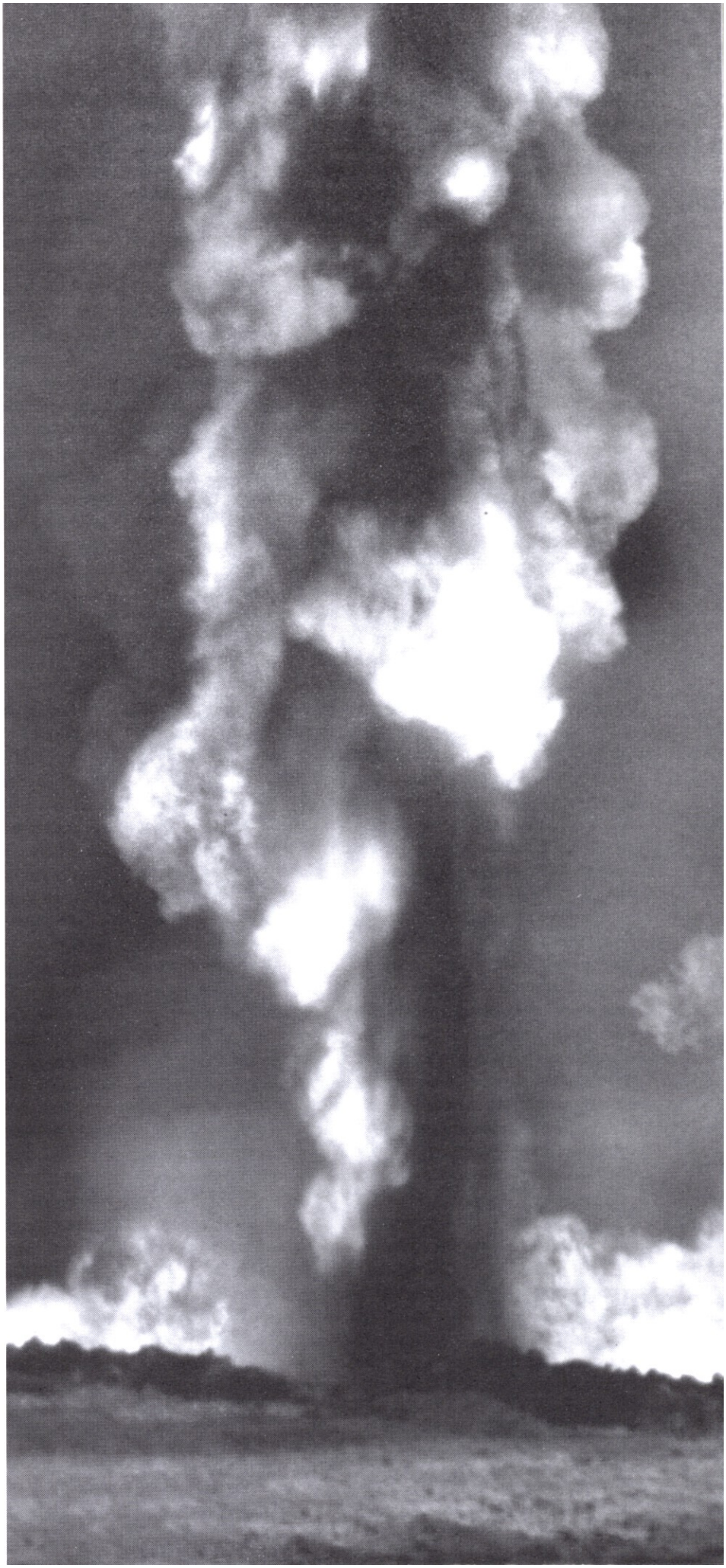
How to make a film about a war that was, cynically and critically, purportedly not a war at all? Gulf War I's most innovative critics, Baudrillard and Virilio, like Herzog, responded to the Coalition's virtual aggression by subversively adopting the war's own strategy of deterrence. With its pilotless planes and camera-guided missiles, this war of deterrence could not be constructively protested unless the public at large was perceptually retrained to think at a distance. Herzog's strategy sees the war framed in a future tense. By refusing to submit to the context of 1991 politics, Herzog exploits the spectacle of Kuwait's oil spills and burning wells on behalf of exploding the idea of war, this new "speed of light" war that is not war; the war of deterrence, deference, non-aggressive aggression, and bloodless, body-less victims. An environmental war, a war waged against the no-man's-landscape, Herzog's film was thinking through the consequences of Gulf War I before they were manifest. Virilio remarked in February 1991 that this was an environmental war.[15] The US strategy was therefore, ultimately, one of *deference* rather than deterrence: the effects will come later, when the wounds of the grandest victim – the environment – begin to show, and seep. Beyond the virtuality of the coalition's electronic warfare there loomed the real repercussions of Iraqi aggression: destroying the enemy's land and natural resources when it could not be controlled as territory, the aftermath would be postponed. Iraqi soldiers withdrawing from Kuwait systematically polluted the region, "in the wake of various oil slicks,...nearly 500 oil-producing wells [were] the victims of the flames,...this atmospheric pollution extend[ed] for over 40,000 square kilometres."[16] *Lessons of Darkness* visualizes what Virilio described as the future of this war, "pure" (sterile, bloodless, trans-human) in the sense that the casualties were as yet undetected. "Pure war," first articulated in *War and Cinema* and informed by the Cold War with its total-peace, dissuasive strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction, was understood as an all-logistical war, defined by the complete integration of armory and communication media. Sterile, invisible, pure war is temporally and spatially continuous, physically and visually undetectable, pure war is war that is indistinguishable from whatever its opposite might once have been. The crux of Virilio is an end of polarities, articulated in *Aesthetics of Disappearance* as the "final abolition of differences."[17] Even pure war is merged with its opposite; for as the continuing relevance of both *Lessons of Darkness* and *Desert Screen* testify, the transition to an ecological warfare means that pure war is not clean war, blood and gore must be reconceptualized as dirt and pollution. Devastation is deferred until the next decade, lifetime or generation. "A vision of the future," writes Virilio, "when this conflict is forgotten, we will still have news from the front." But the reports will not come via CNN, but as "meteorological updates,...showing us, above Kuwait, or Iraq or Saudi Arabia, *the dirty war in real time*."[18] "Operation Desert Storm" as the offensive was called, situates itself as a component of the environment. A storm is naturally indiscriminate, it is also intangible and invisible, except the aftermath of its deferred effects.[19] Virilio's meteorological reference points to what is now perceived as the hidden and self-defeating irony of Desert Storm as an oil war: destroying the environment on behalf of destroying the environment. What did not make sense then, makes less sense now. The war in Iraq is a battle fought to ensure there is enough fuel to continue to fight for nothing less than more fuel, and thus, more fighting rights.

Lessons of Darkness, with its tension between past, present and future, realizes the Virilian spin on CNN's real time that exposes the deadening live-ness of a live-broadcast war. If we look back to Adorno's notion of the causal relationship between essay and subject, the "reciprocal interaction"[20] between presentation and that which is presented, Herzog's vision of the "pure" war that was Gulf War I can be conceptualized as "pure" cinema.[21] The idea is not unlike Baudrillard's notion of CNN's "pure TV", a "medium without a message."[22] Indeed, a rhetoric of purity characterizes Gulf War I in both its method of operation and its representation, by the mainstream media and its critical-theorists and essayists. Herzog's essay form is cinema in pure form because it too sees an end of polarities. Transgressing cinematic topographies on behalf of visualizing the future of Gulf War I, Herzog will not capitulate to the authority of cinematic genres or the trappings of narrative vs. non-narrative, and neither will he directly challenge the politics presented by news media. As *Lessons of Darkness* proved too proximate to the occurrence of the invasion of Kuwait, the film's explosively distanced rhetoric was misunderstood, imploded inward, as venomous criticism testified. Herzog thus also transgresses the idea of audience: this film was made for the future – for an audience now in 2005, not one in 1991. Herzog comments in 2001 that audiences would likely by then be ready to receive the film

well, but at the time Kuwait was too fresh and familiar, the abstraction he enacted seemed grotesque and callous. "In 300 years time," says Herzog, "it will still be unimportant for [audiences] to know the historical facts behind this film. *Lessons of Darkness* transcends the topical and the particular."[23] Again, the war of deference produces a cinema of deference—the real impact of Herzog's pure cinema, like pure war, is carried over into the future, making what will be indivisible from what is.

Adorno's claims that the essay, as a radical text, is not merely an argumentation, but an almost organic representation of its subject matter. Pure war thus engenders its pure representation. Herzog thus internalizes the war's point of view, merging with his subject, but only on behalf of betraying it. *Lessons of Darkness*, for example, makes extensive use of helicopter travelling shots, thus ingesting the mechanics and mechanisms of war.[24] War's visuality consumes film practice and is consumed by it in turn. Like the duplicitous notion of "firepower", like an automobile engine, like the burning wells we see on screen, Herzog views war through the lens of war; burning it with its own flames, until it combusts—thus, driving itself forward at the very moment it also is destroyed. The idea is not to engage with the enemy or the object of critique, but to consume it, become it, alter and then invert it.

Such a radical filmmaking enacts Adorno's assertions about the necessary interconnection between thought and essay, essay and object. The electronic radar-based weaponry and electronically-disseminated images of Desert Storm produces, as Virilio describes, a "sense of weightlessness and suspension of ordinary sensation" thus achieving a conflation between "ocular reality and its instantaneous, mediated representation."[25] Herzog's apocalyptic enviro-war is depicted through extensive use of flying shots which conflate flight and sight, automatic weaponry and photographic capabilities, cinematographic mechanisms and militaristically derived aerial observation. The helicopter, like the "Storm," the structuring conceit of the US



military's Gulf War operation, comes from above, from the sky that hides in the lake of spilled oil. The aerial shot is unseeable, meteorological, disguised as the abstraction of the landscape. *Lessons of Darkness* exposes the seams of this invisibility only once, as the helicopter's own shadow, tainting the desert sand below, slips into the frame of the cinematographer's vision. The helicopter is Herzog's cinematic weapon, inserting him—and the viewer in turn—into the landscape, thus minimizing the differentiation between cinematographer and soldier. Ironically it was the war—not the filmmaker—that dictated what we see, as the burning oil fields were so hot that the pilot had to concede to the heat of the blazes while shooting *Lessons of Darkness*'s aerial portions. The trans-human Gulf War engenders a trans-human filmmaking process, and is thus a further discursive extension of the touchless technology of the smartbomb and the remote-controlled pilotless aircraft. The shooting circumstances of *Lessons of Darkness* enacts the mutuality of pure war and pure cinema. Just as the extreme heat of the enviro-war dictates the path of the flying machine, and therefore what we see on screen, Virilio notes, "People used to die for a coat of arms, an image on a pennant or flag; now they die to improve the sharpness of a film. War has finally become the third dimension of cinema."[26] What was for *War and Cinema* in 1988 the third dimension of cinema then becomes in 1991—along with information, televisual media, electronic and digital communications—the fourth front of the all-logistical pure war. With its striking reliance on helicopter shots, and in the context of the present war in Iraq, *Lessons of Darkness* becomes an extended lamentation for the end of the US's empire of aviation, an empire facilitated by the Age of Oil. Access to cheap fuel is what fuels the Wars in the Gulf just as surely as it causes them, just as readily as war's speed and the perceptual logistics of conflict that ultimately determines cinematic vision.

Like the internal combustion engine, the object of the cine-essay's critique must be consumed, internalized, before it can be torn apart, turned inside out on behalf of constructive analysis, applied with enough fiery friction that it propels the narrative forth, but only as it is simultaneously destroyed. The dissolving distance between the content of cultural production and its form is what preoccupies Herzog as he testifies that a new war, a lightning war, a war that is not a war, demands a new criticism, a new essay, one that is as stealthy and slippery as the sight-less, sound-less military that it critiques. The technology of war, the mechanisms it develops and produces (cinematic, automotive, aviation) alter human perception, as Virilio so often points out. But is also alters criticism, collapsing philosophy into aesthetics, cinema into prose, which, thus twisted inside out and back again, emerge as critical theory, the cine-essay, formal hybrids both. Pure war, pure cinema, and now pure criticism, located in the form of Adorno's mobile, dynamic, speed-of-light essay. Herzog's cine-essay unplugs the war in order to destabilize it. He thus revisions and disarms it, proving the essay capable of visualizing the invisible, articulating the evanescent, materializing the immaterial. The war that did not happen was framed and contained, and therefore did happen,—or so the critical endurance of *Lessons of Darkness* continues to prove.

IV. Theorizing the Expiring: The Reflective Reflex

In *Desert Screen* Virilio writes of the conflation between the aerodynamics of the warplane and the icodynamics of its distant (radar) representation. The name of the game is to avoid detection—Gulf War I sees that the plane exists in digitized representation only—on a screen.[27] *Lessons of Darkness* likewise sees indivisible its maker and its material, the camera's presence is as felt as Herzog's. This is a cinema of reflectivity and disguise, wherein the filmmaker is made indistinguishable from his film.

Herzog's mission was to locate the war that military aviation technology and televisual mediation had flattened into a map of abstraction. After flying over and filming the environmental wreckage, Herzog inserts himself into the intangible sprawl of the Kuwaiti landscape, going to the source of the CNN images, and thus seeming to prove there is a root to Jean Baudrillard's notion of the rootless simulacra. But once this is accomplished, once he's touched down and landed, he then obscures our vision by rendering the landscape abstracted. The viewer is thus disoriented, caught between on-screen and off-screen, historical fact and fictional device, and is forced to focus on the frame, the internal logic contained within. Herzog makes certain everything is centered on what he sees, and yet will yield no answers, for this is not the job of the essay. Truth through untruth, answers which ask questions: cinema, like the essay, must be manipulated in order to get at any sense of truth.

Herzog's physical presence in the war zone is an affront and a challenge to CNN for he refuses the "live" frenzy of Gulf War I, the crisis told in the ticker-tape escapades of the network's real-time broadcasts. Though Herzog's film was an immediate response to CNN's images of "Desert Storm" and a reaction to their instantaneous, spontaneous liveness, Herzog does not allow this same urgency to penetrate the fabric of his film. Indeed, as a meditation on the war as much as it is a mediation of the immediate events, *Lessons of Darkness* slows down and even fossilizes the events of the war, turning fire-fighting machinery into dinosaurs, abandoned weaponry into ancient bones. Stabilizing and then rendering the horror of the enviro-war readable, Herzog, the omni-voyant voyager, is likewise shaping and mediating what transpires on the screen, but does so, as we've seen, for an ideal audience of an unspecified future. A cinema of reflectivity, a visual, literalized reflectivity, as well as a cognitive one, Herzog proves that cinema, and the cine-essay, looks back at the same moment that it looks forward.

War has style, as does its representation. But so does cultivated thought. What was once philosophy, for example, is now the all-encompassing (postmodern) critical theory, as Jameson comments.[28] The current Gulf War sees the US military as the victim of fashion, unprepared for a ground war, for looking the enemy in the eye. This is a war wherein the media also gets dirty, exposing atrocity and inhumanity in the form of "dirty" photographs and "sexed up" dossiers. The pristine lens of the Gulf War I, as the informational postmodern war, the war at the speed of light, obscured the dirt of war, which the current Gulf War now sees resurfacing. What ensures that *Lessons of Darkness* survives the traps of its own

devices and rhetoric, the specificity of its subject matter, all that might have otherwise dated it, or rendered it an artifact, is its stubborn refusal to contextualize itself. How to film a crisis without participating in the crisis itself, how to not become sealed into the wound healed by time and erstwhile forgotten—this is the legacy and lesson of Herzog's filmmaking.

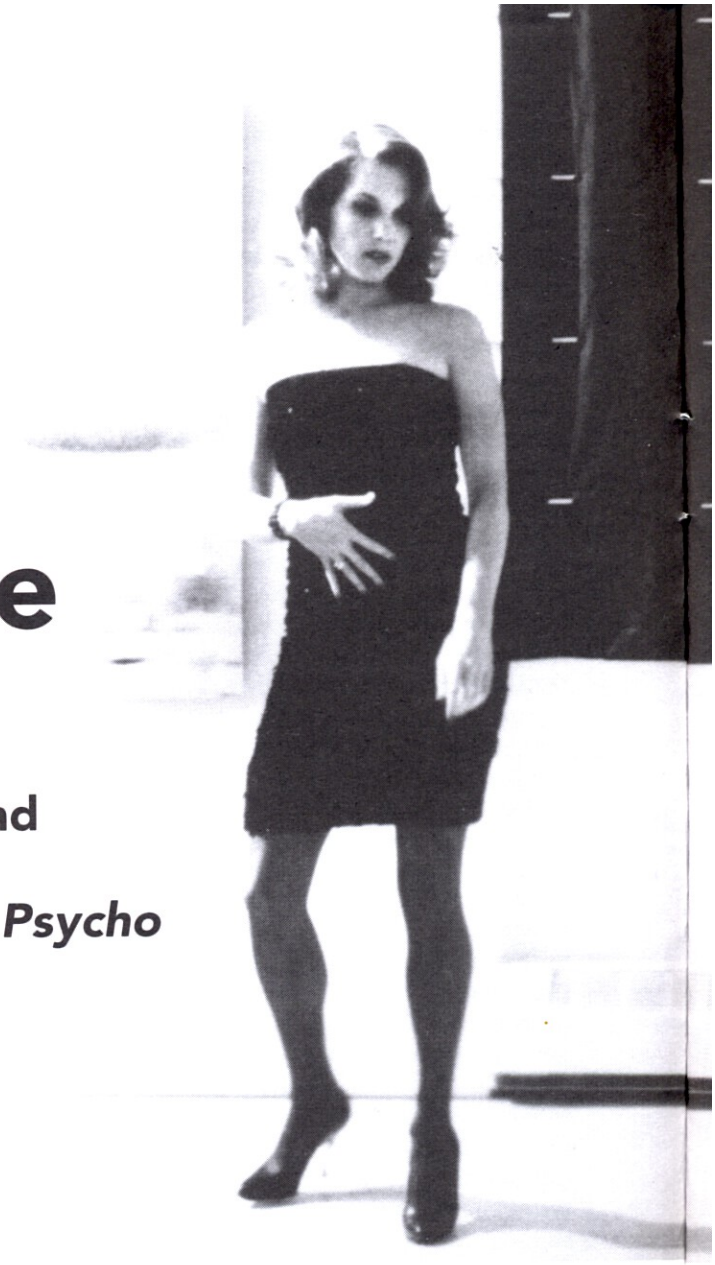
Herzog's cine-essay turns reflectivity into its own self-contained entity: not *a* reflection, the film *is* reflection. *Lessons of Darkness* is a subtly arranged discourse on the nature of disguise, a formal and thematic conflation of what might otherwise be distinct parts. Indeed, cinema is defined as a self-reflective art form; the way we see is always socially and subjectively inscribed. Because both the essay and film are reflective forms, the cinematic essay is thus the apotheosis of systematized self-reflection, a dual assertion of the mutuality that exists between the camera and the eye, wherein the filmmaker becomes embedded within both the subject and the material of the film. *Lessons of Darkness, Chapter Five,* "Satan's National Park", uses extended helicopter shots to capture the lakes of oil spilled throughout an area, now desert, that had once been forest. Herzog's voiceover explains that "Ponds and lakes are treacherous because it looks like the sky—oil is trying to disguise itself as water." The ponds and lakes unfurling beneath the helicopter would be almost unremarkable if Herzog did not point out how unusual and singular all of this is. What is more, oil and water are naturally repellent and therefore cancel each other out, negate the one to the other, and make each other disappear. Likewise, the sky, reflected in the oil-water, disappears into its liquified representation. What we see on the screen is not what it appears. Thinking we are looking at sky, Herzog tells us it is in fact reflection. The camera then pulls back, and the viewer is oriented—or disoriented—as the world is inverted: sky for the earth, earth for the sky. Again, distinctions are fleeting, fluid, as Herzog makes disappearance visible. Sky disappears into the water, which disappears into oil. War thus disappears into its image and becomes indistinguishable from its representation. Water disguised as oil, oil concealed as sky, "Satan's National Park," sees representation turned inside out, just as the film sees documentary disappear into a science-fiction, and the Gulf War fossilized into a series of images. So it is that cinema offers an escape valve from its own trappings as a purveyor of truth—"truth", as Adorno noted in regards to the essay, is obtainable only when it is artificial.

By depicting the reflectivity of the water-oil-sky, looking down and filming that oil, Herzog stares cinema straight in the face, and not just as a reflection, literalized in the commonplace metaphor of the cinema as a mirror, held up for both audience and practioner alike. Virilio writes extensively and repeatedly that modern war is defined by aviation technology, speed and mobility. None of this is possible, however, without oil, fuel, petroleum, the object of both Gulf Wars, the subject of Herzog's film, and the foundation of the tracking, traveling, aerial, helicopter shots that dominate *Lessons of Darkness*. The invention of the internal combustion engine marks the beginning of its own end. According to Virilio's *Aesthetics of Disappearance*, the paradox of technological progress, and thus modernity, is that when something is devised, developed, and starts working, it immediately becomes obsolete.[29] This "working" and progression implies mobility: the mobile shot that was the invention of the war machine becomes as untenable as fuelling the engine of war. Virilio contends that war is mobility. Factor this into the Gulf and what is apparent is that this was/is not just an oil war, war *is* oil, it *is* fuel; it is flying and driving, motion and mobility at whatever speed. Herzog's Chapter Five is a subtle portrait of cinema in which a sky is reflected in a lake of oil. Transitory, illusory and fugacious, the oil-portrait reveals that the essence of cinema is mobility, and therefore a dependence on a disappearing resource. The oil-reflection, as cinema's self-reflection, demands reflection on a cognitive level. If cinema is derived from war and war is dependant on the shrinking oil resources that it fights for, the futurism of Herzog's vision implies a reevaluation of cinema. And not just to once more negotiate the status of the image, but to reconsider film as an industry and a technology that has become enslaved to fuel in order to achieve its speed and facilitate its vision.

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NOTES

1. Werner Herzog, *Herzog on Herzog*, ed. Paul Cronin, London: Faber and Faber, 2002, p. 245
2. *Ibid*
3. *Ibid*, p. 5
4. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logisitics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller, London: Verso, 1989, p. 5
5. *Ibid*, p. 67
6. Herzog, p. 245
7. Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form," in *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, ed. Rolf Titedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 23
8. *Ibid*, p. 20
9. *Ibid*, p. 22
10. See Philip Lopate, "In Search of the Centaur: The Essay Film," in *Beyond Document: Essays on Non-Fiction Film*, ed. Charles Warren, 271-294 (Hanover, NH: University of New England, 1996), pp. 245-247.
11. Paul Virilio, *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*, trans. Michael Degener, London: Continuum, 2002, p. 45
12. Adorno, p. 13
13. Virilio, *Desert Screen*, p. 44
14. Herzog, p. 245
15. Virilio, *Desert Screen*, p. 94
16. *Ibid*
17. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman, Paris: Semiotext(e), 1980, p. 92
18. Virilio, *Desert Screen*, p. 94 (italics original)
19. Though beyond the scope of this paper, the recent devastation of Hurricane Katrina makes it tempting indeed to draw further ironic connections between storms, the US oil crisis and the war in Iraq.
20. Adorno, p. 14
21. Not to be confused with "pure cinema" of the 1920's, the plot-less, impressionistic non-narrative cinema that usually depicted animated rhythms.
22. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 63
23. Herzog, p. 246
24. *Lessons of Darkness* clearly references Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), especially so in Chapter VII, "And a Smoke Arose Like the Smoke From a Furnace," wherein Wagnerian soundtrack accompanies lengthy helicopter shots. In radical essayistic fashion, Herzog thus smuggles in a subtle critique of the continuing legacy of American military aggression.
25. Virilio, *War and Cinema*, p. 73
26. *Ibid*, p. 85
27. Virilio, *Desert Screen*, p. 25
28. Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. ed. Hal Foster, New York: New Press, 2002, p. 112
29. Virilio, The Aesthetics of Disappearance, p. 93



The Unattainable Narrative

Identity, Consumerism and the Slasher Film in Mary Harron's *American Psycho*

by David Robinson

The aim of this essay is to reaffirm the significance of Mary Harron and Guinivere Turner's 2000 adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis's novel, *American Psycho*. With an intricately crafted script and a near-perfect performance by Christian Bale, Mary Harron takes an excessive and volatile novel and focuses its salient cultural criticisms. Her film borrows the horror genre's trademark self-consciousness and takes it to a new level, marrying the genre to a larger body of cultural narratives, including those of television, pop music, news media and advertising. Moreover, it takes the psychological considerations of Hitchcock's *Psycho* and turns them into a comparative analysis in psychosis. Using its protagonist as an analog for Hitchcock's killer, Harron has turned Bates' psychosexual confusion into an abysmal modern equivalent: a man whose consumer lust is transformed into blood lust. The resultant considerations of identity cooperate with the film's metacinematic inclinations to form a study of what makes its psycho distinctly American. When put together, these questions are turned into a powerful condemnation of consumption, both of products and of cultural narratives.

Based on the 1991 novel, the film is concerned with the life of Patrick Bateman/Christian Bale, a handsome, fit and incredibly wealthy white male working on Wall Street in the 1980s. He lives in a decadent apartment in Manhattan and is engaged to a successful and equally glamorous woman named Evelyn/Reese Witherspoon. When he isn't at work at Pierce and Pierce or spending his abundant leisure time amid his league of absurdly wealthy friends and colleagues, Patrick enjoys torturing and killing people. A truly equal-opportunity sadist, Bateman commits acts of violence against individuals spanning the social strata, from homeless people and prostitutes to models and fellow Vice Presidents. His murders are not a means to any rational end—he is neither benefited nor protected by them as might be the case in a suspense film. They are also not motivated by misanthropy or the perverse morality of the recent serial killer films such as *Se7en* or *Saw*. They are inarticulate responses to a desire which the film refuses to explicitly name.

While his technical designation is Vice President in Mergers and Acquisitions (a phrase Bateman makes interchangeable



with "murders and executions"), this title is both more specific and less telling than the old epithet, "Master of the Universe". To the extent to which he can be attributed a personality, he would be best characterized as astonishingly narcissistic and immoral, subscribing wholeheartedly to a Gordon Gekko-esque belief in the value of greed and the justification of self-indulgence. Since he shares his Vice Presidency with both his best friend Timothy Bryce/Justin Theroux and countless others, his specific title is insignificant; it implies less a list of duties than it does a lifestyle. While we never see any of them engaged in any actual work, we do see Bateman using his office to watch "Jeopardy", listen to music on his headset and fill crossword blanks with homicidally obsessive words.

This is indicative of most elements of Bateman's life, from his apartment to his taste in musical theater. Job titles and all other status symbols never refer to the effort that it took to attain them or to the activities that they involve. Rather, they refer almost exclusively to the consumer narratives (or lifestyle narratives) which surround them. This paper's use of these terms is meant to indicate the "full package" offered by any given product, a narratively constructed image of that product's use, encompassing a wide array of aesthetic pleasures. Such narratives are the art of marketing, which draws on the glamorizing power of photography and the moving image. They use this power to tie, for instance, the consumption of a Corona to the pleasurable experience of a lazy afternoon on a secluded, tropical beach. The powerful fusion of these narratives to consumer goods suggests the product's ability to offer a glimpse of these favorably rendered experiences.

Bateman and his Wall Street set are unmitigated consumers and speak in appropriately informed language about specific products, ranging from herb mint facial masks to Valentino Couture suits. Bateman is particularly capable of parroting the language of marketing. ("Courtney, you're gonna have the peanut butter soup with smoked duck and mashed squash. New York Matinée called it 'a playful but mysterious little dish.'") Consumer narratives draw on the preexisting aesthetic pleasure of specific imagery, oftentimes cinematic, such as the Marlboro Man's link to the beautiful

planes and blazing sunsets of the American Western. Seemingly aware of this, Mary Harron works this entrancing consumer language into Bateman's narration of the film and, in doing so, she is able to transform her witty, metacinematic style into larger cultural criticisms.

To begin the discussion of *American Psycho* as a metacinematic slasher film, it would be best to look at its relationship with two of the genre's progenitors. Both the title and the name of its protagonist seem to direct the audience's attention back towards Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. While the title's suggestion to read Bateman as an analog for Norman Bates is intertextually useful, the film is more akin to Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, also released in 1960. Both stylistically and ideologically, these early psychological slasher films represent two different prototypes for what slasher horror can or should be. With *Psycho*, Hitchcock established the empathetic or mimetic horror film. Explaining horror's similarities to pornography and melodrama, Linda Williams posits that "it seems to be the case that the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen."[1] This is certainly Hitchcock's goal in *Psycho* but Powell was after something entirely different.

Following the story of its killer rather than his victims, *Peeping Tom* exchanges mimetic horror for a more psychologically probing style. In this sense, it stands in opposition to Hitchcock's recipe for horror, offering a critical analysis of popular cinema's foundation in sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia, to use Laura Mulvey's terms. The film's protagonist, a deranged cameraman, is Powell's stand-in for the entire enterprise of popular narrative film which has historically served to transform women into simplified objects of erotic desire for a male audience. Using its camera to privilege its monster, *American Psycho* similarly demystifies and examines Bateman and also takes an adversarial stance towards films issuing from the tradition established by *Psycho*.[2] Yet, the distortion between the real and the imagined in Harron's film complicates its relationship with these two prototypes.

While it is less exhaustingly showy about it than other films of its era, *American Psycho* suggests a distinction between the objective reality of the film and the subjective reality of its protagonist. While his voice-over is somewhat sparse, the film is unquestionably being told by Patrick Bateman. However, that narration is made to seem unstable at numerous points throughout the film, highly influenced by narratives ranging from advertising to cinema. Bateman's obsession with these narratives bears heavily on the way in which the film is shot, edited and performed. So, inasmuch as Bateman's subjectivity influences some of its formal elements, the film can, at points, be called Bateman's as much as Harron's. As will be discussed later, the bizarre and dreamlike passages of the film representing Bateman's psychosis seem to deliberately echo films of the Hitchcockian order. However, Harron is interested, as was Michael Powell, in the operation of film on the mind of its audience. As one might hope in a film about a man such as Bateman, Harron adopts the wariness of traditional Hollywood narratives (i.e. the one that Bateman creates) that is key to the Powell tradition. In so combining these two storytelling ideologies, *American Psycho* takes the slasher genre's tendency towards self-reference to an entirely different dialectical level. All of this will be elaborated upon in the ensuing discussions of the formal tampering of Bateman's subjectivity and Harron's own stylistic choices.

There is one more film to which Harron refers us and that is Tobe Hooper's 1974 film, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. As with *Psycho*, it uses the film as a point of intertextual reference, and the parallels between Hooper and Harron's worlds are copious. For starters, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* provides us with the example *par excellence* of what Carol Clover calls the "sick family", implying the set of execrable family values that manifest themselves in the film's foremost monster.[3] Leatherface's clan are rural Texans affiliated with the local slaughterhouse, whose vague evil is suggested throughout the film's first act. At one point in *American Psycho*, Bateman's fiancée points out that his father practically owns the financial group for which he works. While Turner and Harron have chosen to omit the handful of sadistic suggestions about the Batemans which Ellis includes in his novel, they do leave in this fact and its nepotistic implications. If we are to make the most of the intertextual possibilities afforded by Hooper's film, it is conceivable that Harron is drawing American dynasties under scrutiny through a comparison with Leatherface's sect.

However, the comparative sickness of these families is not as interesting or as suggestive as their respective professional affiliations. Each film suggests the unseemly effects of big American enterprises, be they meatpacking or "mergers and acquisitions." When these two businesses are pulled together for comparison, the boardroom becomes the slaughterhouse and all but the wealthy are meat for the grinder. Both films utilize cannibalism to suggest the intrinsic violence of unexpurgated consumerism. Just as Leatherface's Grandfather is paid a tribute of blood in Hooper's horrifying dinner scene, Bateman attempts to consume young women at various points in the film. The chief example is the post-coital double murder of his friend Elizabeth/Guinivere Turner and a prostitute who he names Christie/Cara Seymour. While the three of them are having sex, Bateman attempts to devour parts of Elizabeth's anatomy. When Christie becomes horrified and runs, Bateman chases her down, grabbing her leg and gnawing on it.

The film is replete with further examples. Later on in the film, it is revealed that Bateman has been more successful in other cannibalistic ventures. Referring to "some call girls from the village," Bateman confesses to his lawyer that he "ate some of their brains." There is also the fact that Bateman keeps the severed head of a young model in his freezer next to his sorbet. This freezer is, incidentally, part of a kitchen set that Harron had created to look beautiful, but to also resemble a morgue. In case there were any illusions about Harron's intentions, she has also made a number of brilliant moves which conjoin food with bloodshed, including the scene in which Bateman exercises while watching *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. The scene begins with the startling sound of Marilyn Burns' screams from the film's final scene; but before we see Bateman or the television set, or realize what is going on, Harron shows us a close-up of Bateman's unfinished breakfast plate. This fusion of consumption and bloodshed is found elsewhere in the film as well, most notably in the opening credit sequence. Beginning with a white backdrop,

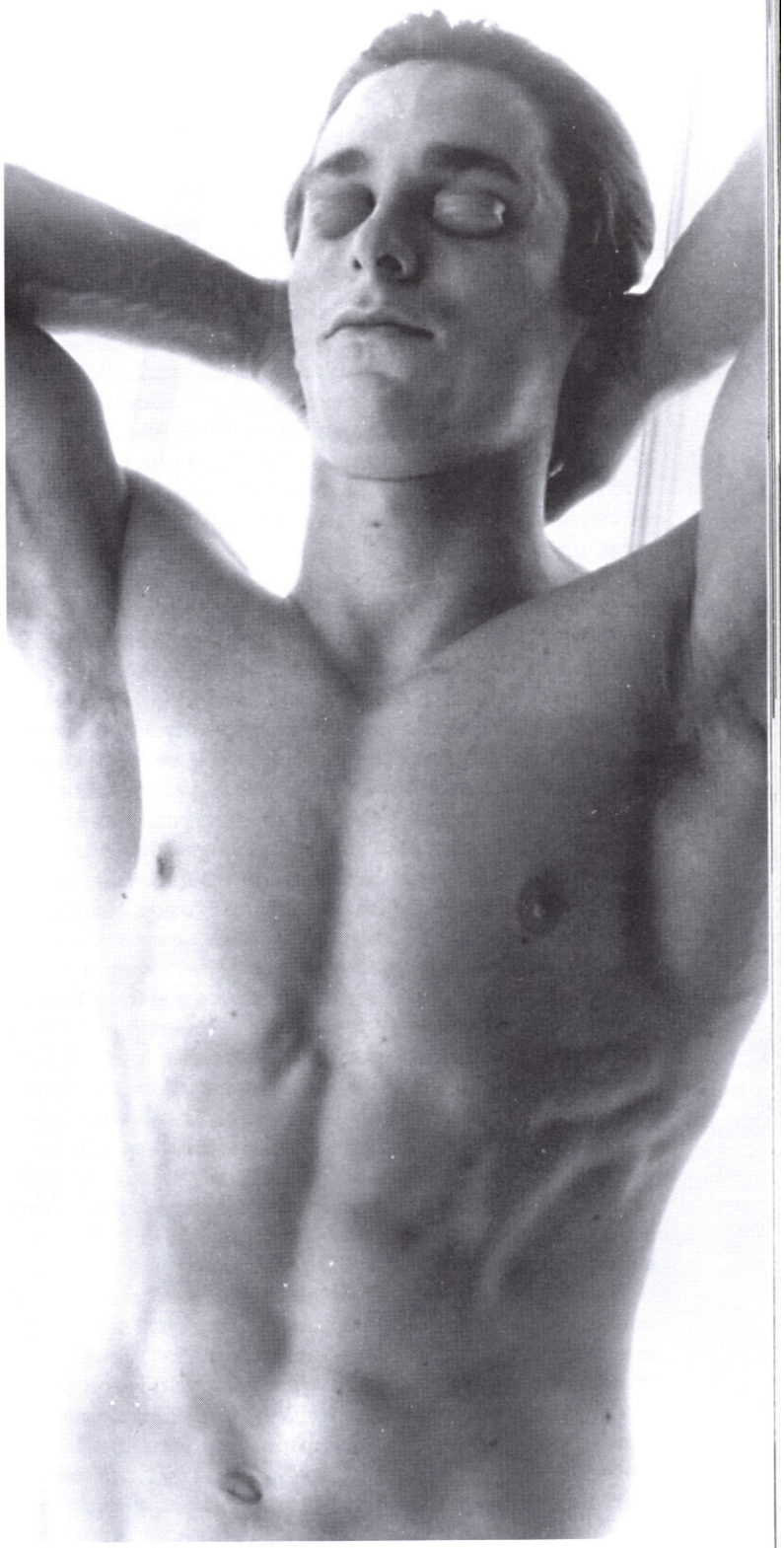
red drops fall from above the picture frame and out through the bottom. We then see a stream of red fluid, followed by a shot of a plate, onto which a raspberry coulis is being dripped to create a lavish and artful entrée plate. Not only does it skewer our assumptions of what the style of a horror film can be, it also points to the connection between consumption and barbarity.

Even more compelling than these intertextual parallels is *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*'s function as a cultural object within the world of *American Psycho*. Some of Hooper's critics were appalled by the film's inclusion in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent film library and its resultant legitimization as a work of cinema. Yet, this inclusion and the brood of imitators spawned by it do make it an established work in a genre that has since become a staple of American cinema, and its importance in Bateman's pop culture panorama is certainly confirmed.[4] Other than a pornographic movie entitled *Inside Lydia's Ass*, it is the only film we see Bateman watching. More accurately, though, Bateman does not watch either of these. He allows them to play on his home television set while he goes about his activities: calling his mistress, flipping through his Zagat's guide, doing stomach crunches. The reduction of these two genres to ambient media implies their normalization in Bateman's mind. Even though each is incredibly sensational, they are not objects to which one pays attention; they are simply background noises and images that one allows to sink in, suggesting the insidious nature of much of pop culture.

That said, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* weighs heavily on the way in which Bateman commits his acts of violence, serving as a how-to manual of sorts on the heinous use of power tools. On her commentary track on the latest DVD release of the film, Harron asserts her belief that Bateman must watch movies for instruction in human activity: "Nothing can come from within because there is no within. Everything is modeled from outside." This is directly implied by the scene in which Bateman orders two prostitutes to engage in a set of sexual activities in front of his home video camera. We know from his viewing of *Inside Lydia's Ass* that he is fascinated by and aware of pornographic tropes. In the scene, he makes specific performative demands on the prostitutes and obsessively addresses the camera, flexing his muscles for it and pointing at his own reflection.

The presence of videographic information in his life is driven home by one of the film's more memorable refrains, Bateman's parting mantra: "I have to returns some videotapes." Significantly, this film serves Bateman practically as the inspiration for his most gleefully horrid murder sequence, to which we are treated towards the end of the film. This highly referential scene is Harron's most overtly metacinematic offering; the criticism it offers is best understood in the stylistic progression she makes out of his murders. As the film moves forward, the rendering of Bateman's misadventures becomes more and more cinematically idealized, as though he were becoming increasingly familiar with the genre's love for making its violence grotesquely particular and memorable.

The first murder that we actually see Bateman commit is not particularly notable in terms of inventiveness. After making a disingenuous offer to give a homeless man some money,



Patrick pulls a knife from his briefcase and stabs him to death. The next illustrated murder is that of Paul Allen/Jared Leto, whose face Bateman destroys with an axe blow. While it may not be noticeable outside of the rest of this progression, there is a leap in sophistication from the first murder to the second. At this point, he has elevated himself to "axe murderer", a nightmare moniker that actually has a definitive place in the American lexicon. It's certainly possible that the videotapes he's had to return include *Silent Night, Deadly Night* or *Psycho Cop*, informing his methodology and helping him become a more defined killer.

The next violent episode takes a noticeable step up, both in terms of its cinematic recognizability and its dreamlike rendering. During the aforementioned double-murder of Christie and Elizabeth, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is drawn more fully into the fold. At the sight of the cannibalistic Bateman, Christie tries to escape, but Patrick emerges from his apartment to pursue her, wearing nothing but a pair of white tennis shoes and brandishing a gleaming silver chain saw. It is already slicked with blood, suggesting that this is the instrument with which Patrick has already killed Elizabeth. Dressed in a piece of lingerie, Christie runs horrified and screaming through the halls of the apartment building. She pounds on doors, her fists leaving smears of blood, but no one is home, and if they are, they do not see fit to respond. She eventually finds a back hallway offering an exit and gains a fair lead, running down its triangulated stairwell. When Bateman enters the stairwell to find her several floors below him, he stops and aims carefully with his still running chain saw and delicately lets it go. Improbably aimed and impossibly angled, the chain saw twirls downward in the air and finds its way into Christie's back, killing her instantly.

Here we have a transition from an abstract and general brand of serial killer to a specific facsimile. Harron has chosen to explicitly reference *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* as the film that has the greatest effect on Bateman's homicidal aesthetic where Ellis uses Brian De Palma's *Body Double* (an interesting artifact in its own right). Yet, this emulation is more slickly realized and improbably executed than anything in Hooper's film, favoring a gorgeous penthouse apartment over Leatherface's bone-ornamented Texas estate. Departing from the book, Harron chooses to closely recreate the moment where Leatherface chases Sally Hardesty to the upper level of his home, where she is forced to jump out of an upstairs window. Once she falls to the ground, he stands above her in the window frame, holding his still-running chainsaw, unsure of what to do. Bateman has thought to improve upon this scenario, as he stands flights above his prey. Because of these deviations there is an insincerity to Bateman's mimicry—a gentrification of violent atrocities which makes them seem almost unreal.

The rest of the world's obliviousness to the sounds of screaming, door pounding and a running chainsaw in the middle of the night add to this air of surreality. Tying these oddities together is the *faux raccord* which ends the scene. After holding the shot of the impaled Christie laying in her own blood, the film cuts to a crudely rendered illustration of the same image, scrawled in blue and red crayon. We realize in the next shot that Bateman is compulsively rubbing this image onto the paper tablecloth of an upscale restaurant, leaving open the suggestion that the murder, or at least its specifics, may be the product of Bateman's violent fantasy world.

Although we never see Bateman with such publications, there seems to be the standing suggestion that he chooses to wear and purchase the things he does because he's seen them advertised in publications like Esquire and Gentleman's Quarterly. Yet, for him, it is just as logical to see *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and go out and buy an exquisite stainless steel power tool. While we might scoff at this assumption, Ellis, Turner and Harron all seem to agree that both of these processes of fatuous imitation are on the same level morally. Both of them involve a blind faith in the validity of what is being presented to them as consumers. This collision of mass media, pleasure and violence is established in the film's second scene, when Bateman and his friends go to a nightclub. One of the club's centerpieces is an assembly of three scantily clad women, holding guns and fluidly shifting their six arms and six legs into different configurations, obviously connoting the iconic logo of the television program, *Charlie's Angels*. This is a pretty brilliant move on Harron's part. While its marriage of sexuality and violence is morally repulsive, its incarnation through the mimicry of an established piece of popular culture seems to inoculate it. So it is with *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Since it has been culturally validated by its success, it is worthy of emulation.

But *American Psycho*'s treatment of slasher films as internal objects is more than mere cheekiness. This is what makes *American Psycho* more than another self-referential horror movie. As opposed to the self-awareness of the *Scream* films, for instance, that of *American Psycho* serves as an entry point to questions of how narratives work in our culture. In short, it opens up onto criticisms of the larger fabric of consumer narratives that color Bateman's world and affect his perception. Along with cinema, the effects of pop music, advertising, the press and television programming all play heavily in Bateman's conception of reality. In the type of society in which Bateman lives, all of these media work together in order to weave narratives. These narratives are created with the interests of men like Bateman at heart; but through the persuasive force of the mass-produced image, they are forced upon everyone.

The ability of a mobilized mass media to create associative webs of predetermined values and to promise full access to an experience of them is at the heart of marketing. This is suggested by social critic Christopher Lasch who offers a helpful analysis of this insidious collaborative art: "consumption promises to fill the aching void; hence the attempt to surround commodities with an aura of romance; with allusions to exotic places and vivid experiences; and with images of female breasts from which all blessings flow."[5] What is being sold is a body of consumer narratives. The vast body of fictions issuing from a culture based on this system is an indispensable element of Bateman's personality.

Echoing the book, Turner and Harron depict Bateman as a man obsessed with the images spouted endlessly by mass media. His need for social integration in the Wall Street scene requires profound and continuous consumption in the form of power suits, power lunches, etc. This acquisitive attitude towards objects and experiences as tools of advancement

becomes the dominant ideology to which Bateman and his cohorts adhere. As Lasch goes on to say:

> In the period of primitive accumulation, capitalism subordinated being to having, the use value of commodities to their exchange value. Now it subordinates possession itself to appearance and measures exchange value as a commodity's capacity to confer prestige—the illusion of prosperity and well-being.[6]

However, to Bateman, this capacity is not exclusive to commodities. His heartless need for consumption is not confined to traditional items such as his apartment and clothing or his outings to expensive restaurants and clubs. It reaches beyond that to include things which American culture has deemed signs of success, stability and personal wealth—things such as women, his profession and his conversational prowess.

One of the most damning lines in regards to this problem is uttered when Bateman is sitting in a taxicab with his "supposed fiancée," Evelyn. Bateman says that they can't get married because he wouldn't be able to take the time off of work. She replies, "You hate that job anyway. I don't see why you just don't quit." Bateman volleys with intense annunciation: "Because I want to fit in." Even Bateman's job has become a slave to the acquisitive lifestyle that it has created. This is because of the persuasive force of the lifestyle narratives that surround Bateman. In fact, Bateman requires cinematic instruction for more than just extraordinary activities such as chainsaw executions and performative sex acts. His entire conception of social conduct is informed by a variety of sources, reaching from the inane pop music of the 80s to men's interests magazines to The New York Post's Page 6.

The body of cultural narratives with which Harron has the most fun is the pop music of the 1980s, for which Bateman demonstrates a profound fondness. A number of the film's most comical scenes are tied to his vapid yet tireless contemplation on pop music, most notably Huey Lewis and The News, Genesis and Whitney Houston. Harron has taken the isolated, non-contextual chapters of Ellis's book that read like career biographies of these artists and turned them into solipsistic monologues that Bateman delivers in the presence of others. Whether it is Bateman's intention or not, these monologues all precede acts of violence. It's as though, through the power of his oration, he is able to convince himself that other human beings are little more than objects for his consumption and pleasure.

The two finest examples of this are the declamations preceding his pornographic film shoot with Christie and Sabrina and his double murder of Elizabeth and Christie. In each case, he turns his monologues into a bizarre form of foreplay, speaking at length about the virtues of Genesis and Whitney Houston, respectively. While hilarious in the book, these fragments of armchair rock criticism become far more interesting when rendered as self-absorbed monologues witnessed by other people. His seemingly well-rehearsed lecture on the merits of Genesis' merits are frequently broken up because of his need to give Christie and Sabrina orders:

> "In Too Deep" is the most moving pop song of the 1980s about monogamy and commitment. The song is extremely uplifting. Their lyrics are as positive and affirmative as, uh, anything I've heard in rock. Christie, get down on your knees so Sabrina can see your asshole.

The standing irony of such a statement in preparation for a sexual encounter with two prostitutes is made manifold in light of the fact that Bateman also has a fiancée and a mistress. While he will admire that a song can stand for something like monogamy or commitment, he does not see the practical application of such virtues in one's personal life. To Bateman art, because it is little more than a lifestyle narrative, is something that one can literally buy into. While the virtues that he believes Phil Collins to espouse in this song are things that are worth attaining or acquiring, they are not things that are worth working towards.

Clearly, the content of these musical narratives mean nothing to Bateman. Ironically, it is from this vacuousness that they draw their power. They create fantasies that point to themselves as universal truths that will, in time, be revealed. They create dream worlds where love and beauty reign without exception; and through an appreciation, Bateman feels he can enter into those worlds. Take his feelings on Whitney Houston's "The Greatest Love of All," whose "universal message crosses all boundaries and instills one with the hope that it's not too late to better ourselves." What bettering oneself would mean to a man like Patrick Bateman is hard to imagine; but such a consideration is immaterial. While these ideas are attractive, they serve one better as concepts for consumption than as maxims to apply to one's life. They are simply narratives that Bateman must consume in order that they will reflect their light back upon him. He makes a similarly meaningless speech about social justice when out to dinner with friends at another outrageously expensive restaurant. Here he states that we must "encourage a return to traditional moral values" and "promote general social concern, and less materialism in young people." Again, thoughts about value and ethical considerations are good only to taken as objects which confer the image of thoughtfulness and sophistication.

Similarly, certain formal elements of the film, such as his fantastically rendered murders, can be seen as narrational attempts by Bateman to make his story correlate to cinematic ideals. There are a few fine examples of this that are also related to his love for pop music. At several points in the film, Bateman's attempts to soundtrack his life actually serve to soundtrack the film. The first moment comes as the camera follows a taxicab through the streets of New York City as Robert Palmer's "Simply Irresistible" plays on the soundtrack. Once we see inside the cab, however, this non-diegetic music is actually revealed to be the music which Bateman is listening to on his Walkman. Another attempt by Bateman to escape the world via his headphones begins with establishing shots of the city's skyline to the upbeat tune of Katrina and the Waves' "Walking On Sunshine." When we see Bateman inside his office building, however, the music is again revealed to be the song to which Bateman is listening.

Wisely, Harron makes both of these attempts at soundtracked escapism unsuccessful. Bateman is forced by his talkative and demanding fiancé to remove his headphones, numbing his enjoyment of the Robert Palmer tape. Too, when



"Walking On Sunshine" is revealed to be issuing from his Walkman, we see Bateman walking through his office hallway wearing a hard grimace on his face that mocks the intended effect of the song's lyrics. He is forced again to remove his headphones by his secretary who informs him that he is late and begins talking to him about the day's appointments. Also violated is a tranquil moment in which Bateman sits in his office alone, eyes closed, listening to Chris De Burgh's "Lady In Red."

These moments where Bateman's fantasies breach the barrier of realism can be most accurately thought of as unsuccessful attempts to self-narrativize. Surrounded by myriad narratives from cinema, music, the Times' style section, etc., Bateman is driven by a compulsive need to author all of his living moments in similar terms. This is why he feels the need to soundtrack his existence. It is why he and his colleagues must dress a certain way and dine at certain restaurants. It is why when he has sex, he must make prostitutes perform the types of acts that he sees in pornographic films. As far as attempts that actually rattle the stability of the film itself, perhaps the most mortifying example comes towards its end. During the double murder of Elizabeth and Christie outline above, Bateman's desire to consume narratives and cinematize his life become so strong that they actually cause a rupture in his first-person narration. When Christie tries to escape, the attention of the camera, which has been exclusively linked to Bateman's subjectivity, is given over to Christie, capturing events that he is not there to witness.

This is the most pressing evidence of Bateman's subjective reality as following the Hitchcockian template for manufacturing horror. In *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol Clover composes a thoughtful glossary of the genre's staples. She defines the slasher films as follows: "the immensely generative story of a psycho killer who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived."[7] As Clover describes it, this Final Girl is customarily the protagonist of the film and the only character developed to any significant degree in the first act. She is the figure who experiences the nightmare of the serial killer firsthand, and through whom we vicariously experience fear. One of the more important duties the Final Girl has in helping the audience to achieve that fear, is to make herself a witness to other atrocities. Oftentimes in an attempt to escape the killer, the Final Girl will suddenly stumble into the killer's Terrible Place, where he or she has piled up the bodies of his antecedent victims. Already afraid for her life, the Final Girl is at this point forced to perceive the mutilated corpses.

Once the camera is given over to a mimetic depiction of Christie's subjective reality, she fulfills both of these roles consummately. As stated above, Bateman's deeds become increasingly idealized and oriented around existing cinematic clichés as the film goes on. This perspectival digression plays into that, making Bateman's rendering of the scene polyscopic. Because he has cast himself in the role of the serial killer, he needs others to play a more significant role in this

narrative, which is modeled after *Psycho* and its progeny. He needs someone to fulfill the role of the Final Girl. Like any other narrative in his world, Christie's subjectivity is just another aspect of his own story which is available for his consumption. Yet, the reason which he consumes her subjectivity is to make himself a more powerful simulation of a slasher film monster. This means of self-identification is tied to the questions of identity which pervade the film and emerge as one of its most important considerations, that of identity.

Much of the film's humor comes from the astonishing homogeneity of Bateman and his cohorts. This is most powerfully established in a scene in the Pierce and Pierce boardroom where Bateman and his colleagues have gathered in preparation for a meeting. Before the business begins, one of their most esteemed contemporaries, Paul Allen, enters and approaches Bateman. Allen's importance within this social circle has already been established in the first scene, where Bateman points him out to his friends Bryce, Baxter and Van Patten. Bateman's importance to Allen, however, is undermined when Allen refers to him as "Halberstram." Bateman smiles politely as his voiceover enlightens the audience:

> Allen has mistaken me for this dickhead, Marcus Halberstram. It seems logical because Marcus also works at P&P and, in fact, does the same exact thing I do. He also has a penchant for Valentino suits and Oliver Peoples glasses. Marcus and I even go to the same barber, although I have a slightly better haircut.

That this "seems logical" points to Bateman's central struggle. Bateman cannot be accurately identified by Paul Allen because of how successful he has been in his attempt to "fit in." This is an important moment for Bateman. As discussed above, Bateman has the utmost respect for the corporate veneer of well-being that it supersedes his need to act in favor of truth or value.

Therefore, most likely to maintain an air of fraternity, Bateman allows Allen to go on believing that he is, in fact, Marcus Halberstram. Given Bateman's guilelessness throughout the film, it is hard to imagine that he has done this for tactical reasons, although his actions do work for him in that respect. Before Allen leaves the room, he is distracted by one of Bateman's friends, to whom Allen gives his business card. Bateman takes this as his cue to present his new business card to his friends. The scene is comically over-the-top in its evocations of cinematic violence, which are consonant with Bateman's ongoing desire to attain a cinematic level of experience. It begins with Allen's entrance, when Harron uses a sound-effect belonging to the Western genre: the sound of a rattlesnake's tail.

She does not stop at that, making the opening of each business card holder sound like the "shing" noise of a sword being unsheathed. The visual aspect of the scene is also laden with intensity. As its narrator, Bateman renders the scene with the seriousness of a shootout or swordist's duel. Unfortunately, he does not possess the bigger weapon and the duel devolves for Patrick into a pathetic defeat, his painfully demeaned signifier left undistinguished. The scene clearly places Bateman's need for identification in high importance. The importance of consumer goods as a means of solidifying one's identity is something that will figure in later in this discussion.

This is Harron's most overt narrative illustration of Bateman's search for identity through consumer goods. She elaborates on this dilemma on the formal level with one of the film's more telling visual motifs. Throughout the film, the camera shows Bateman meeting his own gaze in reflective surfaces. In a lesser film, these moments could be read less compellingly as instantiations of the protagonist's narcissism; but with the insistence of Harron, Turner and Bale on characterizing Bateman's insecurity, they take on a quality of neediness. What makes it germane to this discussion is the fact that most of these reflective surfaces represent or integrate consumer objects. The first instance is in a nightclub, where Bateman stands at a bar, facing himself in the large mirror, lined with top-shelf liquor bottles. In the next scene, Bateman urinates in his bathroom, looking intensely at his own reflection in the glass of the framed *Les Miserables* poster that overhangs his toilet. In the same scene, Bateman looks into his own eyes in his bathroom mirror. He then opens the mirror, revealing a bevy of body care products which replace his image in the picture frame. Not long thereafter, Bateman is handed a menu at an upscale restaurant called Espace whose entrees are engraved in a sheet of reflective metal. In a first-person shot of the menu, we can vaguely make out the outline of Bateman's face as he checks and smoothes his hair. It is also worth noting that Bateman's kitchen, the place where his food, severed heads and torture supplies are secreted away, is decorated entirely in highly reflective stainless steel.

These shots reveal Bateman's attempts at self-identification through an attempted participation, or presence, in the narratives of popular culture and advertising. As he says in one of his early voice-overs, "though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable, I simply am not there." Therefore, the best he can do to recover this absence is to "find himself" within those specific pieces of representation. In this sense, the film offers an echo of the skeptical postmodern response to the concept of the self, one described by James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium in the following terms:

> ...any sense of a central point or fulcrum for being or from which to evaluate experience has disappeared. The metaphysics of presence, which oriented us to experiential time and space, is no longer meaningful; the self has no location as such, no witnessable presence to which we can coherently respond. Indeed, if we even try to speak of the self in the context of hyperreality, which Baudrillard does not, we can at best refer to it as a field of images for itself. The self appears in myriad locations, untamed by criteria of authenticity.[8]

The self that Bateman has crafted is similarly decentralized, anchored only by its relationship to the market-tested significance of designer suits, the value of particular apartments and the exclusivity of specific restaurants. Greater than any religion or philosophy, these are the elements that compose Bateman's psyche. These do not have the centralized power of a religion or a philosophy; but they don't need it, because

they are protected by the legitimacy of the grand narrative of capitalism.

It is worth remembering that Bateman's style of consumption is narrative-driven more than it is product-driven. Therefore, his use of possessions as a means of self-identification reaches beyond consumer goods to include all of the nontraditional possessions outlined above. Bateman's acquisitive ideology has convinced him that all things, including other people, are suitable objects for him to take in as a means of identification. They are a crucial part of the narratives which he continually gropes at and attempts to emulate. Thus his need to possess a fiancée and a job, although he loathes both. These importance of these elements to the life of the typical successful, white, heterosexual male's life have undoubtedly been impressed upon him by GQ, television and pop music.

Another intriguing aspect of Bateman's battle for identity—and one that revives this paper's comparative *Psycho*-analysis—is his appropriation of other identities to commit his murders. The first illustrated murder, that of the homeless man, occurs immediately after the business card showdown. Having been belittled in another man's success narrative, he uses this murder to reassert his significance. It is perhaps not terribly coincidental that the homeless man's name is "Al." Bateman is made to feel subordinated and belittled by Paul Allen, who approaches him at the boardroom table and, standing over him, literally talks down to him. Bateman's response is to immediately seek out someone over whom he can assert his status. So, he uses the murder scene as an opportunity to assume the same dictatorial position over the seated Al, a temporary surrogate for Paul Allen in this status-oriented psychodrama.

His need to adopt other identities in order to commit violence becomes more obvious in the murder of Paul Allen. Here, he must play the role laid out for him by Paul Allen, as Marcus Halberstram, in order to get close enough to kill him. Once he lowers Paul's defenses with alcohol, he then has to take on the culturally validated identity of the axe-murderer in order to overpower Allen. Having destroyed Paul Allen, Bateman decides to consume *his* identity as well. It is under the name of Paul Allen that he has sex with and tortures Christie and Sabrina. Also, from the dead bodies which are revealed there later in the film, it would appear that he has been committing most of his violent acts in Paul Allen's apartment. All of this is further complemented by his adoption of the strength, agency and notoriety of the Leatherface identity.

All of this smacks of Norman Bates's homicidal split personality. According to the lengthy psychological monologue at the end of *Psycho*, when Marion Crane arrived at the Bates Motel, Norman was helplessly aroused by her. This strongly disagreed with his maternal alter-ego, whose puritanical disgust was introjected into Bates's personality. Tormented by this psychic rift, the dominant personality of Bates's mother acted to make any sexual transgression impossible. Similarly, Bateman needs the help of dominant personalities in order to commit his acts of violence. The implication of this parallel would seem to be a characterization of Bateman as passive in relation to the murders. This is explained in a scene that is subtly reminiscent of the psychologist's monologue in *Psycho*; but here it is delivered by Bateman's lawyer, Harold Carnes/Stephen Bogaert, on whose answering machine Bateman has left a full confession of all his deeds. When Bateman runs into him at a bar in the film's final scene, Carnes thinks that he is someone named Davis, and believes that the entire message was a joke. When Bateman asks him what he means, Carnes assures him: "Your joke was amusing. But come on, man. You had one fatal flaw. Bateman is such a dork. Such a boring, spineless lightweight. Now, if you'd said Bryce or McDermott—."

This is the film's climax. Bateman no longer need worry about being apprehended or brought to justice; but his punishment is far more damning. Bateman is overcome with terror at the idea that his confession was perceived as a prank. Bateman's opening declaration, "I simply am not there," was delivered with calm understanding. By the end of the film, this cool attitude is gone. He has become frenzied and pleads with his lawyer to legitimate his identity: "Don't you know who I am? I'm not Davis. I'm Patrick Bateman. We talk on the phone all the time. Don't you recognize me?" Somehow, Bateman has created a series of events that he knows to be true; but they are unknown to his colleagues and ruled out by the private investigator of Paul Allen's murder. And when Bateman attempts to convince Carnes that he killed Paul Allen, the lawyer tells him that his claim is impossible, "because I had dinner with Paul Allen twice in London just ten days ago."

They may have happened; but the fact that they are not recognized in mutuality means that they might as well not have. In the world that Bateman and his friends occupy, interiority and self-knowledge are deemed irrelevant. Even that which one senses to be true must be confirmed by the pack in order to gain credence. That which is private is devalued; and because of this, so are Bateman's proclivities, leaving his sense of reality unsalvageable. In spite of his best attempts to narrativize and cinematize his activities, they are not legitimated by integration as public knowledge. Here is a man whose life is spent trying to make his narrative match-up with the narratives advertised to him continuously; and he is being told explicitly that those attempts have been unsuccessful. Since this is Bateman's sole means of identification, this failure becomes toxic.

Herein lies one of the most ruinous and irremediable things about the world of *American Psycho*. The overwhelming force of public opinion is what creates truth; and what is dealt by mass media and popular culture will be widely believed in the final analysis. Immediately after his interaction with Carnes, Bateman returns to the table at which his friends sit, watching the news. On the bar's television set is Ronald Reagan, delivering a speech to the American public on the Iran-Contra scandal. Bateman sits down, inattentive to the words coming from the TV. Faced with the damning evidence of Congress' final report on the matter, Reagan has been forced to explain his belief that "foreign policy can't be run by a committee." His attempts to justify his secrecy, his disrespect for the law and his transgression of administration policy are questioned only by Timothy Bryce, who asks aloud, "How can he lie like that?"

It took a report by U.S. Congress to coerce Reagan into admitting this information, and the admission takes the form

of a justification. The end result was that Reagan's approval ratings rocketed back to their previous level not long thereafter. The power of Reagan's secrecy preceding the institution of the Tower Commission is actually trumped by the deleterious effect of this public rationalization. Bryce tries to initiate a conversation about how successful Reagan has been in his abuse of power: "He presents himself like this harmless old codger, but inside... But inside..." This initiates the first sentence of Bateman's final, and most elegiac monologue. His voice-over looms over the scene: "But inside doesn't matter." What is known to be true on a personal level does not fulfill the requirements of mass mediated truth. The perception of others rather than one's actual actions or thoughts define one's identity; and when these two things do not correlate, it leaves self-knowledge in a state of chaos.

The film's basic premise suggests the American consumer mindset, taken to its logical extreme, will expose itself as inherently violent. Specifically, it reveals the nature of a culture which has become overwhelmingly narcissistic, a trait fueled by the marriage of consumption and narrative. For Bateman, consumption is not geared towards the accumulation of simple pleasure, but towards the pleasure of self-identification. Yet, his desire for such pleasure is never satisfied. Take, for instance, Bateman's disposition after his highly-idealized romantic evening with Christie and Sabrina. Everything was in place—his tuxedo, his bath oils, his girls and his music—to create a full-package collision of multiple consumer narratives. All of it should have culminated in an ultimately satisfying sexual encounter, the type of reward which is always implicitly promised through association in advertising. Even though he has gone to such extreme lengths to make the narrative of this evening coincide with the lifestyle narratives that have been presented to him, he is left feeling vacuous, his appetite unsated. In fact, his expression after the encounter is one of tedium, impatience and agitation. It is then that he decides that he will keep the prostitutes there so that he can torture them.

His participation in consumer narratives has failed to imprint his identity into space-time and validate his existence, even when forcing other people into a position of spectatorship. Therefore, he is forced to slake his thirst through other means. Here is the aching void which Christopher Lasch discusses. Here, though, it is not brought about by the dissatisfaction of the working class, but by the malaise of excess and narcissism. Bateman has failed to realize that self-identification through consumption cannot bring about a sense of satisfaction and that taking in a product will not envelop one in the majesty of its brand identity. The problem is that consuming something rather than relating to it—loving, understanding or cherishing it—is to effectively destroy it. This is why Bateman can never achieve satisfaction. For to possess something—to force it into the intricate fabric of meanings that constitutes an "I"—is ultimately to obliterate one's relation to that thing.

So, it is a deep dissatisfaction and a failure to attain a primal need that results in violence. This complex of consumer frustration is an elaboration on that which drives Norman Bates to kill, completing the intertextual relationship between the films. Only the response to need is different. In Bates's case, a perverse sexual morality forces his hand to violence. For Bateman, it is the belief that he has inherited from his culture that consumption will somehow satisfy, if only he can increase its virulence. This endemic problem is very similar to Lasch's description of the Marquis de Sade's conception of a sexual utopia.

> His ideal society thus reaffirmed the capitalist principle that human beings are ultimately reducible to interchangeable objects... In the resulting state of organized anarchy, as Sade was the first to realize, pleasure becomes life's only business—pleasure, however, that is indistinguishable from rape, murder, unbridled aggression.[9]

Because it draws Bateman under scrutiny as a consumer of—and even as a victim of—narratives, the film forces the viewer to question the ethics of his or her own spectatorship. In this respect, the film stands above a genre that already stands above itself. The film makes a damning example of the narratives internal to its world and includes its own genre within that fabric of fictions. The film appeals to an audience whose love for astute viewership and cliché-awareness has been empowered by the seductive hipness of films such as the *Scream* trilogy. Yet, this film knows itself and knows the insidious power of the material to which it stands in opposition. It knows that you know it as well. It knows that its audience is not composed of the adolescent male horror fans that Linda Williams points to in her essay, but rather the adult versions of these boys whose early fascination has bred late familiarity. Aware of all of this, Harron and Turner implore their audience to consider their participation, complicit in what unfolds before them. Whether the film proves successful or not in terms of this urgent message, it begs its viewers to consider their role both as viewers of this film and as consumers of the violence, both explicit and implicit, in the narratives of their popular culture.

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NOTES

1. Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" in Braudy and Cohen, eds.: *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, New York: Oxford University Press,1999, p. 704.
2. To name a few films belonging to the Powell tradition, I would include, for various reasons, *The Eyes of Laura Mars*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The Minus Man* and, to a less serious extent, the *Scream* films. Although it is hard to categorize as a slasher film, I would also place *Videodrome* in this continuum.
3. Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
4. While these imitators are essentially Hitchcockian in formula, I am referring specifically to works such as the *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween* films. Namely, any slasher film whose villain does not significantly resemble a human being and that forgoes any significant degree of psychological complication in its showcased monster.
5. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York: W. W. Norton Company Ltd., p. 73.
6. Ibid., p. 72.
7. Clover, p. 21.
8. James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 67.
9. Lasch, p. 69.

Trauma and Violence

Different Sensibilities: Nanni Moretti's *The Son's Room* and Todd Field's *In the Bedroom*

by Henry M. Taylor

The present paper examines questions of trauma, violence and mourning by comparing two feature films with the same basic subject, namely, the way in which a family copes with the death of an only son: Nanni Moretti's *The Son's Room* (*La stanza del figlio,* Italy/France 2001), and Todd Field's *In the Bedroom* (USA 2001). Both low-budget, powerful family dramas, they have met considerable critical acclaim: Moretti won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2001, and Field's independent first feature won numerous prizes (at Sundance and elsewhere), and was nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Despite their similar premises, however, there are crucial differences in the way trauma and violence function in either drama: in one death is the result of an accident, of natural violence, with trauma contingent and endured without redeeming catharsis; while in the other trauma is an effect of interpersonal physical violence and, being unbearable to those affected by it, perpetuated by means of revenge. This junction seems symptomatic of deeper cultural sensibilities regarding individualism, agency, and justice endemic to Europe and the United States respectively. Before reading Field's film in view of American cinema's attitude towards violence, I will begin with a discussion of *The Son's Room.*[1]



In the Bedroom

THE SON'S ROOM: Trauma endured

Moretti's humanist study of loss and grief in an affluent Italian family, which he co-scripted, directed, and co-produced, is set mostly in the small city of Ancona, on the Adriatic coast. A ninety-minute feature, its narrative turns around a psychoanalyst (a crucial choice of profession) confronted with personal tragedy, but is, significantly, itself psychoanalytically structured as a story of trauma and its working-through: composed of three sections, each is roughly thirty minutes long. Act one we could call "The seemingly perfect life," act two "Tragedy, loss and mourning," and act three "Letting go: an open-ended journey." Act one consists mostly of elliptical episodes acting as a bracket describing the "little things" in the life of Giovanni Sermonti/Nanni Moretti. The film opens on Giovanni in t-shirt, slacks, and gym shoes jogging along the harbor, large ferries and container ships moored in the background, with the credits superimposed. The sunshine and bright colors of late summer set the visual tone for the rest of the film and serve to counterpoint the melancholy later on, while the *Italianità* of Nicola Piovani's instrumentally backed-up piano score combines leisurely cheerfulness with a distinct note of sadness. There is a striking long shot of Moretti running on the quay, and a freighter painted red looming large in the background, the meaning of which shall be fulfilled much farther in the narrative. The presence of these huge ships, expressing the massiveness of the real, will act as the allegorical embodiment of fate and the contingencies of life dwarfing the individual's will, in a world in which people are not fully in control of what happens to them. They also embody the enormity of grief and sorrow that will overwhelm the family. This symbolism, however, is latent, not superimposed, but naturally embedded in the mise-en-scène.



The Son's Room

Throughout act one, there is on the surface a "lightness of



The Son's Room

being" conveyed by a narrative style at once matter-of-fact and elegant, an easy flow of movement, a slow pace synchronized to human time, of minor activities in the mode of frequentative. As in the rest of the film, there is no strong causality or anticipated action. After his jog through town, Giovanni pauses at a café, having a cup of coffee and a glass of water, recalling the ending of Moretti's episodic essay *Dear Diary* (*Caro diario*, Italy/France 1994), in which he had conquered cancer (after consulting one doctor after another unable to correctly diagnose, let alone cure his illness—a subtle plant which will pay off later, when Giovanni's patients accuse him of not being able to help them). Equally reminiscent is his attraction to dancing, here to a group of Hare Krishnas singing in the street; Moretti follows the chanters, caught up in their rhythm, still singing their Buddhist chant upon returning to his flat. As we soon find out, he is happily married to Paola/Laura Morante, a curator in an art gallery (as is revealed later on), with two well-mannered children, seventeen-year old son Andrea/Giuseppe Sanfelice, and their younger daughter Irene/Jasmine Trinca. Giovanni's work as a psychoanalyst takes place in a practice attached to the apartment. Little vignettes revolve around Giovanni, whose liberal bourgeois life appears harmonious and content, centered by family and profession. In a sense, not much happens. Life seems to be almost lacking a lack, everything revolving around the father, narcissistic in his sense of control. Admittedly, there are the small quotidian irritations, his daughter's boyfriend smoking pot, for instance, or the fact that, watching Andrea play tennis in an outdoor court, his son seems to lack the appropriate competitive spirit. But there is a vague foreboding introduced early on: Called to his son's school upon returning from his jog, the headmaster confronts Giovanni with the accusation of Andrea and another pupil having stolen a fossil from the biology classroom. Andrea denies this vehemently, but there remains a lingering doubt in his dad's mind.

And then there are the patients, presented as both sad and comic, an odd bunch of secondary characters whom the

film's voice, just like the psychoanalyst, doesn't quite take seriously: an obsessive woman who for the past five years has wanted to terminate her analysis; a sexually confused young man, perhaps suffering from a more serious borderline disorder than the bourgeois ennui plaguing some of his other clients; Oscar, a middle-aged patient who thinks he's happy and content, yet finds himself ruminating about suicide; and an arrogant client referred by another therapist. In the second scene with one of his male patients, Giovanni confronts the latter's pervasive guilt feelings, admonishing that in life we do not have everything under control, but the analyst himself doesn't heed this advice. Finding himself increasingly irritated by his patients, reacting to their compulsive behavior, preoccupation with death, or dissatisfaction with analysis impatiently and aloof, Giovanni's attitude indicates early symptoms of professional burnout.

But the narrative threads presented so far—the son being accused of the theft, and the kernels of subplots related to the patients—would hardly be able to sustain an entire narrative. When something finally occurs in the form of the *event*, it is catastrophic. At first, Andrea finally admits to his mother that he and a friend did steal the school's fossil after all, just for fun. It is an admission that, on the level of the interior narrative journey, reveals an imperfection, a crack in the harmonious façade. The external plot point comes a bit later, when Giovanni, one Sunday morning having brunch with his family, receives an urgent phone call from his suicidal patient Oscar and is persuaded to visit him at home, despite wanting to go running with Andrea. The ensuing parallel montage of spatial separation of all four family members indicates things to come, the fragmentation caused by the traumatic event: Giovanni driving to his patient's remote house by the seaside; Andrea with a couple of friends preparing to go scuba-diving and driving out to sea by boat; Paola almost being knocked over by a man running through a fleamarket; and Irene out with friends riding on their motorcycles. Giovanni is first confronted with the real when Oscar tells him he's been medically examined and probably has a lung tumor; a feeling of helplessness and inevitability sets in. Upon returning home, he is met by a man and Andrea's friend Luciano with the news that his son has had an accident; there is no explicit mention of death, but the gestures tell it all. We are never shown the accident itself, which almost figures as an absent cause. Driving to his daughter's school, where she is engaged in a basketball match, his anguished face speaks for itself. In the flat, the parents and Irene embrace in sorrow and crying. The world revolving around Giovanni has been decentered, the flow of life interrupted: as during the scene at the hospital, where Andrea's body is kept, and Giovanni tells his wife he has to make a few phone calls; at first seeming collected, he dials the number of a relative, but when an answering machine comes on, all he can stammer is "I just wanted to leave a message, I wanted to tell you that—," before breaking down. He cannot put it in words. The scene's understated nature, with the camera maintaining its distance, makes the moment all the more poignant. The wake is equally matter-of-fact: as family, relatives and friends stand before the coffin, kissing the dead once more, Irene wishes to take one last look at her brother, before the coffin is sealed with lead and screws are drilled in one by one—an attention to details symptomatic of a traumatized consciousness fragmenting reality into distinct moments, and underscoring the finality of departure of a loved one.

The unity of the family is torn apart, paternal authority shaken; and from this point on, the narration ceases to be exclusively focussed on the father. Each family member deals with the loss in separate ways; Paola lying on the bed and screaming, sobbing; Giovanni at night alone at a fairground, where all movements, fun, excitement and garish lights seem unbalanced, reality unhinged, movements erratic; riding on a rotating swing Giovanni is seen absorbing the shocks of the violent movement, emphasized by POV shots presenting a world out of bounds. Rather than life revolving around him, now it is he being rotated to the point of physical revulsion. In his work, too, Giovanni has lost his aloofness, and is suddenly unable to maintain his professional distance. In the session with Oscar he finds himself partly blaming his hypochondriac patient, partly himself, overwhelmed by recurring flashbacks in which he replays the events of that fateful Sunday morning. Instead of linear narrational flow there is nonlinear repetition, like a record stuck in a groove. The discourse of words is interrupted and blocked by the silent images of Andrea inserting themselves beyond conscious control. Giovanni recalls the urgent call from his patient which he blames himself for having given in to, while his mindscreen presents alternate versions of that day, in which he postpones seeing Oscar and therefore spends Sunday with his son, thus preventing Andrea going scuba-diving and the fatal accident. By accusing himself, of course, Giovanni is unconsciously still trying to exert control; he cannot let go. The therapist himself is in need of a therapeutic talk in supervision. While Paola stays at home, for the time being not going to work, the trauma takes its toll in many ways. During a basketball match attended by her parents, Irene starts a fight with other players, leading to her disqualification from the team. In the busride home afterwards, Irene sits separate from her parents, wanting to be left alone. The narration's restraint is also evident in the way in which information on the cause of Andrea's death is divulged: non-dramatically and through delayed exposition. Details of the accident's circumstances are related much later in the second act.

At this point, we might reflect in a brief theoretical excursus more generally on how catastrophes, whether personal or societal, are dealt with. After every disaster, whether man-made or natural, after the initial numbing shock people first try to find out what exactly happened, and then who is to be blamed; in the aftermath of catastrophe, we frequently encounter a sense of that *scapegoating* which René Girard describes in his anthropology of communities in pervasive crisis regenerating themselves through surrogate victimage and physical or symbolic violence.[2] Arguably, the purpose of blame and retribution, however absurd it may seem from a more objective viewpoint, serves to give society a sense of *individual human agency*, of being in command of what happens to us. Action theory is also the foundation of most schools of psychotherapy, providing the patient/client with a

sense of empowerment and responsibility. Psychoanalysis, however, which in this respect is radically opposed to any "holistic" approach such as Jungian psychology, insists on that traumatic and psychotic kernel of the real which can never be fully "integrated" into the symbolic reality of the individual subject, and can only be distanced and disguised by myth, ideology, and narrative, the latter of which may *seem* to integrate the traumatic real, but in effect can only do so by virtue of being an illusion—a healthy illusion, admittedly.

Significantly, also by absenting the catastrophic event, Moretti's film is honest as to the contingent nature of the trauma, its fragmenting effects, and a certain impossibility of catharsis which any sincere treatment of the subject must indicate. We are shown how tragedy is often meaningless and random, and the pathetic efforts we make to try and explain it to ourselves. Giovanni has visited the shop in which Andrea purchased his scuba equipment and asked the vendor about specifics relating to the meter on the oxygen flask. Sitting in a restaurant with Paola, he is searching for a causal explanation of their son's accident, trying to lay the blame on the possibly faulty diving equipment—but, as his wife replies, attracted by a peculiar fish, Andrea had swum into an underwater cave, lost his orientation, and, not being able to find the way out, had run out of oxygen and drowned. Confronted with the pure contingency of the fateful tragedy, both succumb to their emotions. But the women—mother and daughter—are the stronger characters. Irene had already taken the initiative beforehand, wanting to have a mass read for the memory of her brother; while her father, afterwards, at home wallows in self-pity about everything being blemished.

The change to a new phase and act three is prepared by Paola, finding in the mail a letter to Andrea from a girl named Arianna, who had met him only once and had fallen in love with him. Going into Andrea's bedroom, which Arianna had written about wanting to see, everything is still untouched, tidy, a room conserving the memory of their son. Opening the wardrobe, she buries her face in Andrea's red sweater. Reading the letter to her family at table, she is moved by the girl's perception of Andrea's shyness and wants to meet, to phone her. But Giovanni is reluctant—after all the girl doesn't know of the accident—and suggests writing her a letter. But again, sitting at his desk and drafting a note, he keeps on getting stuck; in place of words, flashbacks recur of Andrea and himself jogging in the streets. This third act is the act of conflicts between the parents breaking out in the open, and of letting go. The initiative seems to have shifted to Paola. At a dinner with friends, she starts telling the guests about Arianna's letter to Andrea and how she would like to meet her. Tellingly, Giovanni places his hand on hers, squeezing it, wanting to prevent her talking about their son. After a drive home in silence, Paola confronts her husband with his egocentric narcissism, of holding back, of always wanting to control everything.

However, things are beginning to crack, perhaps for the better. In one of the analytic sessions Giovanni starts sobbing uncontrallably; in another, there are long, leaden silences; and, in a reversal of roles, the patient whom he had earlier told not to have guilt feelings now accuses him of being too lenient, although in life everyone had to pay for everything and he couldn't understand how some people weren't prepared to pay their dues. Giovanni finally has to admit to his wife that he cannot go on working; he has decided to give up his practice for the time being. Ironically, but tellingly, it is this termination which might produce a therapeutic move forward for all parties: Oscar, sympathetically inquiring after his shrink's well-being, tells him he is ending his therapy and has come to say goodbye; Giovanni at first retorts that patients often say that: the shrink refusing to let go of his patients. But Oscar is surprisingly serious, being thankful for their work; now, however, being ill (his tumor real), his one concern is getting well. Another client wants to cope on her own, faithfully waiting for his—uncertain—return; while the sexually troubled patient vents his anguish in frustration, yelling about his distress, thrashing the furniture, but empathically embraced and calmed down by Giovanni. The film's voice demonstrates its humanism through sympathy for all the characters; noone here is a "bad guy".

It is Paola who phones Arianna and tells her about Andrea's death. Her impetus of letting go, of externalizing the lost object, gradually sinks in. In a record store Giovanni has a salesman who knew Andrea select a CD which his son might have liked, and we get to hear Brian Eno's hypnotically mellow, melancholic "By This River" (from his 1977 album *Before and After Science*). At the apartment, surprisingly, Arianna shows up, awkwardly invited in by Giovanni. When Paola and Irene return in the evening, the mother is at first overwhelmed, but ultimately highly pleased to meet the sensitive, remarkably serene teenage girl. She shows them the photographs Andrea had made of himself in his bedroom and sent her, which Paola is touched by. It turns out that she is hitchhiking with a boyfriend to France. The next scene shows the parents, Irene, Arianna and her boyfriend at night driving towards the next highway stop. The situation echoes an earlier outing of the whole family singing in the car. Both Paola and Giovanni seem to have displaced their paternal feelings onto the girl; and a certain fluidity of movement seems to have returned. In the end, the youngsters asleep in the back, Giovanni drives through the night, crossing the country from east to west, and arriving at dawn at the French border by the sea, that great provider and taker of life. In his questions to his wife about Arianna and her companion Giovanni again seems to express paternal clinging; but when the time has come for goodbyes, and Arianna promises to write to them, the two kids get on a bus, and once again, the parents have to let someone dear go.

Accompanied by the Brian Eno song, the final shot, Arianna's lingering point of view of the family, shows three people on the shore, separated from each other, but together as a modern family, each absorbed in their own thoughts, facing an uncertain future, and yet perhaps having found a new harmony. There is a delicate balance oscillating between the melancholy weight of loss and a new lightness of being, as the trio recedes in the distance and the image fades out. Life goes on, the loss remains, but is displaced. There is no real resolution based on symbolic exchange, or ultimate catharsis, only a profound sense of ambivalence.

IN THE BEDROOM: Trauma perpetuated

There are striking similarities between Moretti's film and Todd Field's *In the Bedroom*. Apart from the similar title and plot premise of a family traumatized by the death of an only son, and trying to cope with this loss, there is the generally slow pace of the narration, governed by the focus on the behavior and activities in the lives of "ordinary people". There is the geographical setting in the vicinity of the sea, on the Atlantic coast, of a well-kept, conservatively sedate New England town, Camden in Maine, and as in *The Son's Room*, the story here too begins in summer. The film begins in pastel colors on a poetic note of almost magical realism, which will set the tone of much of this drama: young, sensitive, dreaming, untroubled Frank Fowler/Nick Stahl chasing after pretty, petite Natalie Strout/Marisa Tomei down a slope of a wheat field, then both of them lying in tender embrace, kissing and caressing, a moment of complete happiness underscored by a pastoral sense of fertility. The couple are obviously freshly in love, though Natalie is a mature woman in her thirties, at least ten years older than her adolescent lover. It is a moment of almost atemporal bliss, which will not last, of course, and which will contrast with the tragedy weighing down on it in due course.

The first ten minutes of narration provide the main body of exposition. During the summer break after college, Frank is spending much of his time driving out to sea on a boat, catching crabs, sometimes together with his dad Matt/Tom Wilkinson, a staid medical doctor in his mid-fifties seeking escape from professional routine. Frank's aged, somewhat fragile mother, Ruth/Sissy Spacek is active part-time, conducting a choir rehearsing Balkan folklore songs which, in the course of the narrative, will act in their harmony and serenity as counterpoints to violence and tragedy. A subplot exhausting its run by the end of the first third of the narration concerns the choice Frank has to make concerning whether to go to university, as planned by his ambitious parents, especially his dad, or to set up shop with his own boat, and continue his



In the Bedroom

relationship with Natalie, who, as we find out, is still married, if separated from her husband, with custody of her children. After ten minutes of screen time we are introduced to the main conflicting forces structuring the narrative trajectory, dramatic interpersonal action. And it is from this point on that the two films discussed here go separate ways. Unlike Moretti's film, whose main protagonist is the father, Field's drama is more of an ensemble film, only in the second act shifting its main point of view to Frank's parents.

At a barbecue at the Fowlers' with friends, Natalie, Frank and his parents are unpleasantly surprised by the sudden intrusion of Natalie's husband Richard Strout/William Mapother, an unvited and unwelcome visitor who has come to see his kids—"elements of the future" spelling no good.[3] Richard is a transgressor, and the film's voice has no sympathy for him; portrayed as a dangerous force, he is revealed to be a psychopath whose aggressiveness is true to type, a bully part man, part boy, his coarse looks "naturally" expressing brutality and violence. It isn't hard to see why Natalie has separated from her husband. But it is primarily through the expressions of concern on the part of Frank's family and Natalie that he is set up in this way. Richard being the designated bad guy, we will not be given the slightest chance of sharing his point of view; that is, not until the end of the film.

The more he is refused and rejected by his still-not-divorced wife, the more the jealous husband will mount a series of escalating aggressions. Coming home one afternoon, she finds him sitting in her kitchen. Presenting her with an unwanted gift, a metal trophy commemorating a prize he won at high school, which could be wielded for bludgeoning someone, he declares his intention of returning home to her and the kids, him being their father. Richard's apparently sudden change of heart is obviously no news to Natalie, who tells him as much ("you never change, do you?"). Being in a new relationship, she flatly rejects his suggestion of moving back in again and giving their marriage another try. She accuses him of never having lived up to his paternal duties, a real father being, according to the formal phrase she uses and presumably picked up from her legal counsel, a "consistently positive presence" in the lives of their children. We can certainly well imagine his past history of unsteadiness, probably also of drinking bouts ("with the boys"), and of domestic violence or abuse. Patriarchy rearing its ugly head. Despite making out with another woman, which he thinks little of, Richard is intensely jealous of Natalie's new lover, which is perhaps also related to differences of class, as he refers to Frank as a "college boy." But, for the time being, Richard follows his wife's request and leaves before the kids return home.

The contrast between her former and new lover could hardly be more pronounced. Caring, mildly mannered, good-looking and slightly irresponsible, Frank is a dreamer, but his dreams are infectious. Life is wide open, the future beckoning. His past is untainted, and Natalie responsive to a better present. Outdoors one evening, using little bricks from a construction kit, he explains to her the "brilliant" design of an apartment he wants to build for them as a family. His vision of a mutual future counters her jesting concern about their age difference. But the moment is cut short; Natalie and Frank are surprised by the arrival of a car. The narration, however, at this moment, shifts to Ruth Fowler's rehearsing of Eastern European folklore music, a suppressed gap, as we soon learn, of a violent incident. This suppression is not coincidental, but will prove to be systemic, regarding emotions kept under tabs and finally serving a rationale of vindication.

Upon returning home, Ruth finds her husband tending to Frank's bruised and battered right eye. Not showing the act of violence directly, but its effects, we understand that there has been a confrontation with Natalie's husband, a first significant plot point after 25 minutes of screen time. While the incident is clearly upsetting to his dad, it is Ruth who seems to be the most rational, outraged and, quite sensibly, immediately wanting to put an end to these altercations by calling the police and having them impose a restraining order on Richard Strout. However, both Matt and Frank are "weak", appeasing in not wanting to make too much out of it, and of upsetting Natalie and her kids. There is definitely a sense in which Frank's father seems "soft," not quite up to the part of *pater familias*; and indeed, in the course of the narrative, Ruth will prove in many ways to be the stronger, but also more coldbloodedly unforgiving character of the two of them. With Ruth's advice overruled, the conversation between Frank and his mother shifts to his relationship with a married woman, which Frank earlier on had declared to be nothing serious, contrary to the way the narration has depicted the young lovers. There is a sense of conservatism here—appropriate to their New England community—in Ruth's implicit reproach of Frank's youthful irresponsibility, as though he were complicit in bringing on this violence.

But there is worse to come. At Natalie's house, Frank finds her in tears over the destruction Richard has wrought on their living room, having smashed the furniture. As Frank tries to console her, there is a knock on the door, it is Richard come back. In panic, Natalie begs Frank not to let him in, while she and her son Jason withdraw to the relative safety upstairs. Frank tells Richard to go away, but the latter surprises him by entering the house through the back door. The narration shifts its focus to Natalie upstairs, while we hear a ruckus down below, a verbal argument escalating in intensity and volume, followed by a gun shot. With the crime taking place offscreen, and Natalie rushing downstairs, we are given a brief shot of revolting gore: Frank motionless on the floor, his head in a pool of blood, after being shot in his left eye, which, ejected out of its socket, forms a bloody mass on the floor. Richard is holding the weapon, standing in front of the body. We have not seen the killing directly, and the film effectively leaves the question unanswered whether it was premeditated murder, or rather, as Richard will claim in the ensuing court procedure, an "accident," i.e. manslaughter. We are 35 minutes into the film, which, accompanied by Natalie's wailing, very slowly fades to black, creating a deliberate caesura. A world has come to an end.

The slow fade-in on the funeral sets the visual and atmospheric tone for the remainder of the film. The weather is wet and drab, and there is a profound sense both of a leaden chillingness and of a tremendous weight imposed on time and movement. With the preceding first act of the film still tied to the Deleuzian action-image,[4] it now seems as though everything occurs in slight slow-motion. In the Fowlers'

house, with family, friends, and neighbours, above all there is a quiet, oppressive mood, much less a sense of that externalized grief we find throughout the second section of Moretti's film. Here, of course, the tragedy the parents are confronted with is all the more terrible as they have not only lost their son, but their only child, which in a way deprives them of their future and makes their lives seem almost pointless. In a quiet moment seeking the memory of Frank in his room, with his son's architectural drawings now witnesses of a potential never to be realized, Matt is overcome with emotions, but the expression of his sorrow and anguish is private, somehow kept under tabs. More so than showing their grief openly, there is a sense of profound depression of the parents, and of the film itself. Its poetry of a leaden, but invisible burden weighing everything down is such that in certain moments, the vista of the street leading up to the family's house, or of the cemetary, or of the wind blowing through the foliage of a tree almost suggest a ghost-like presence, as if Frank's spirit, unlike his physical body not yet laid to rest, were lingering and haunting the vicinity. There are powerful moments of silence. For instance, when Matt is joined together with his buddies and playing poker. When his turn comes, he simply stares at his cards, seemingly endlessly, his mind stuck in a groove of ruminating, unable to say a word, until finally daring someone to speak out and break the ominous silence. The fragmentation and dispersal which we already observed in *The Son's Room,* are present here, too. The relationship between Matt and Ruth seems numb, dulled.

It is symptomatic, however, that Field's drama ultimately cannot bear its own depression, its weight, its temporary denial of movement and action which persists through much of the second act. The parents are gradually forced to face not only the fact of Richard Strout being released on bail, paid for by his wealthy dad who owns the local cannery, of his being a free man until trial, which might take place in the unbearably far away future of 12 or possibly even 18 months. Far worse for them is the increasing probability that their son's killer will get off with manslaughter, possibly facing as little as five years in prison, due to the fact that Natalie has to admit in court not directly witnessing the shooting, an admission Ruth cannot bear. While Matt seems able to accept Natalie's apology and of not having lied in court when they meet by chance in a grocery store, Ruth is unable to do so. When Natalie showing up at one of her choir rehearsals, she wordlessly slaps her in the face.

The mother's sense of frustrated vengeance is not only due to her bitterness about having lost her only offspring, but driven by that very American attitude towards justice governed by the biblical logic of "an eye for an eye". For her son's killer to be only temporarily sent to prison, be it five years or, at most, fifteen years, cannot be, Ruth wants him put away for good. It is she who will be the driving force in this tale about hot-blooded killing and even worse cold-blooded revenge. After a chance encounter with Richard—at a distance, simply seeing and being looked at by him in response—Ruth accuses Matt of never openly expressing his sadness, accusingly saying she missed her son, and indirectly blaming Matt for Frank's death. The quarrel, driven by pent-up feelings of futility and bitterness, allows both of them a measure of alleviation. We wonder whether their marriage will completely come apart. However, as Ruth tells her husband, she is constantly seeing her son's killer all over town, finding it unbearable. Driven by his wife's sense of anger and vindication and trying to keep a tenuous hold on their crumbling marriage, Matt, the weaker of the two but still the *pater familias*, finds himself precipitated into taking the law into his own hands.

As an undercurrent gradually gaining force, the narrative has been building towards this, ever since the film's midpoint, when Matt's buddy Willis had invited him to his cabin the woods. There are only implicit suggestions in dialogue exchanges that Richard Strout needs to be got rid of permanently. But the sense of action having to be taken sooner or later gains momentum. We enter into the final act, lasting fully thirty minutes. Having found out at which bar Strout hangs out at, one evening, as Richard steps outside, he is confronted face to face by Matt, who forces him at gunpoint to get into the car and drive, with Matt sitting in the rear. The film has spent so much time on the suffering of the Fowlers that the film's viewers wish for some kind of retribution and punishment of the killer. The director will give us this revenge, but not in a way we might have hoped for, shocking us instead. As spectators, we do not know at first what exactly is going to happen, especially after Matt tells Richard he is going on a journey. We may believe initially that the kidnapping is indeed meant to force the killer to leave town, or that Matt is planning to beat him up. At first, he forces Richard to drive to his own apartment, to pick up clothes for his enforced "vacation". We may also fear for Matt, wondering whether he'll be able to keep the situation under control, or whether the violent killer may suddenly turn the tables and overpower him. But, as it gradually dawns on us, every step, every move on Matt's part is premeditated, carefully planned, and now executed with an increasingly chilling logic.

After having Richard pack some things in a bag, and having carefully placed a flight voucher on one of the cabinets for proof of the "holiday" departure, Matt has Strout drive into the woods, at night. The latter's growing concern about this not being the route to the airport notwithstanding, the kidnapper holds his prey in the illusion of spending the night here before departing on his flight. The kidnapper's cruelty of totally deceiving Richard makes us share some sympathies with the victimizer-turned-victim. Having arrived at Willis' cabin, in the midst of the forest, Matt has Richard get out and walk ahead, before shooting him in the shoulder, and then, with Strout collapsed on the ground, shooting him in the back. It is cold-blooded, meticulously planned and executed murder, and not alleviated in the least by Willis's surprise and protest at Matt not having waited with the killing until the next day. "I couldn't wait," Matt replies matter-of-factly, a phrase that could well serve as a motto for the entire second half of Field's drama. In a perverted twist of emotions and events, it is not a question here of reason keeping feelings under control, but, quite the opposite, of the emotions sustaining the logic of revenge.

With Strout's body wrapped in plastic, bundled, and buried in the midst of the woods at night, Matt in the early hours of dawn drives across the river back home to Camden. As meticulous as before, he takes off his coat and clothes,

washes himself, and goes upstairs silently to the parental bedroom. Ruth is sitting up in bed, awake, and smoking a cigarette. As Matt slowly slides under the covers, she simply asks in complicity, "Did you do it?" Nodding, then turning his back to her, Matt lies on his side, staring, ruminating. He tells her after a while, without mentioning Richard's name, that he had been struck by something in his apartment, a photograph of him with Natalie. We, too, have seen this photo, a picture depicting a smiling, happy couple in embrace. As the leaden burden weighing down on much of the film persists, we begin to sense that Matt is aware of having paid a very high price for maintaining his marriage. The camera pulls back, revealing in dissolves the house from the outside, then in a wide long shot a chilly new morning setting in over Camden. The film ends in uncomfortable ambiguity, as the panoramic view of the New England community suggests that this logic of revenge is part of a broader cultural imaginary.

AN INABILITY TO MOURN: Action and Violence in the American Cinema

The pervasive coldness of the second and third act of Field's drama contrasts significantly with the emotional warmth which Moretti's film sustains throughout, even in its many moments of grief and sadness. It is symptomatic that in the latter—lacking actions in the strong sense—death and tragedy are caused by a contingent, natural event, without a properly cathartic resolution to the trauma. In the American version of the same basic plot premise, the son's death a) is caused by physical interpersonal violence, b) perpetrated by a bad guy for whom the film has next to no sympathy, and c) the resolution to the crime is an act of violence following the logic of revenge. While in the former film the trauma is worked through in the sense of "use value", without finally being completely resolved, in the latter the trauma is never properly exteriorized or worked through due to the main characters' lack of mourning. Their loss is instead fed back into the "exchange value" of individual agency regained, retaliation, and imaginary closure. Action theory, individual agency (supported by the liberalist ideology of "possessive individualism") reassert themselves in Field's "independent" film, however much it may differ from the Hollywood mainstream in terms of humanist focus, poetry, and pace. It ultimately proves itself unable to go beyond the personalized ethics of good versus evil, however much it may seem to critique that ideology by narrative's end, or, for that matter, the Deleuzian action-image with its sense of symbolic exchange, and Classical Hollywood's "[character-centered] causality, consequence, psychological motivations, the drive toward overcoming obstacles and achieving goals."[5] And, of course, narrative closure.[6]

Towards the end of his first cinema book, Deleuze writes about the American (postclassical) cinema not having gone beyond its tradition of the action-image. Sustaining itself through a set of clichés, its sometimes critical attitude towards violence ultimately remains caught in a vicious circle of even more physical violence, now either become excessively spectacular or else increasingly pathological. The European art cinema since World War II and Italian Neo-Realism, situated beyond the movement-image and its sensory-motor schema of action and reaction, tended towards passive, purely observing characters, incapable of strong actions and wandering through "any-spaces-whatever" in a fragmented, post-traumatic world.[7] Due to the overpowering pressures of the market, however, the American cinema, unlike its European counterpart which depends on public-sector subsidies, never really developed a genuine modernist cinema in the form of a New Wave. The relatively short-lived New Hollywood—prior to *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) ushering in the current reign of the high-concept blockbuster—effectively synthesized classical filmmaking with art cinema. But the pull of genre, wish-fulfillment, and mythology, including those myths of frontier justice, gunfighter nation, and of regeneration through violence, which Richard Slotkin traced in indigenous literature as far back as the 1600s, and to which characters in popular American fiction regularly resort in conflict, have remained all too powerful.[8]

We find ourselves forcibly, and chillingly, struck by the logic of revenge. Based on die-hard notions of "rugged individualism," and supported by a certain inability to mourn or "to wait", it ultimately serves to perpetuate trauma and the vicious cycle of violence. It is also in this sense that America's cultural imaginary, as it expresses itself so well in film, remains one of wish-fulfillment.

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NOTES

1. Thanks to Alfred Messerli and Luisa Rubini (Zurich) for sharing their ideas with me during the preparation of this paper.
2. Cf. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986. Originally published as: *Le bouc émmissaire*, Paris: Grasset, 1982.
3. The term "elements of the future" designates plot elements producing temporally vague anticipations of potential future developments in the narrative. cf. David Howard, Edward Mabley, *The Tools of Screenwriting: A Writer's Guide to the Craft and Elements of Screenwriting*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995, pp. 74–75.
4. Cf. Gilles Deleuze: *Cinema 1. The Movement-Image*, London: Athlone Press, 1986, especially pp. 141–177, and pp. 197–215. Originally published as: *Cinéma 1. L'image-mouvement*, Paris: Minuit, 1983.
5. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, London: Routledge, 1991 [1985], p. 13.
6. Ken Dancyger, Jeff Rush, *Alternative Scriptwriting: Writing Beyond the Rules*, Boston [etc.]: Focal Press, 1991, pp. 3–4.
7. Cf. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, chapter 12: "The Crisis of the Action-Image," pp. 197–211, and ibid.: *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, London: Athlone Press, 1989, chapter 1: "Beyond the Movement-Image," pp. 1–24. Originally published as: *Cinéma 2. L'image-temps*, Paris: Minuit, 1985.
8. cf. John Orr, *Cinema and Modernity*, Cambridge [etc.]: Polity Press [etc.], 1993, especially p. 30, and Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973.

"All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story."[1]

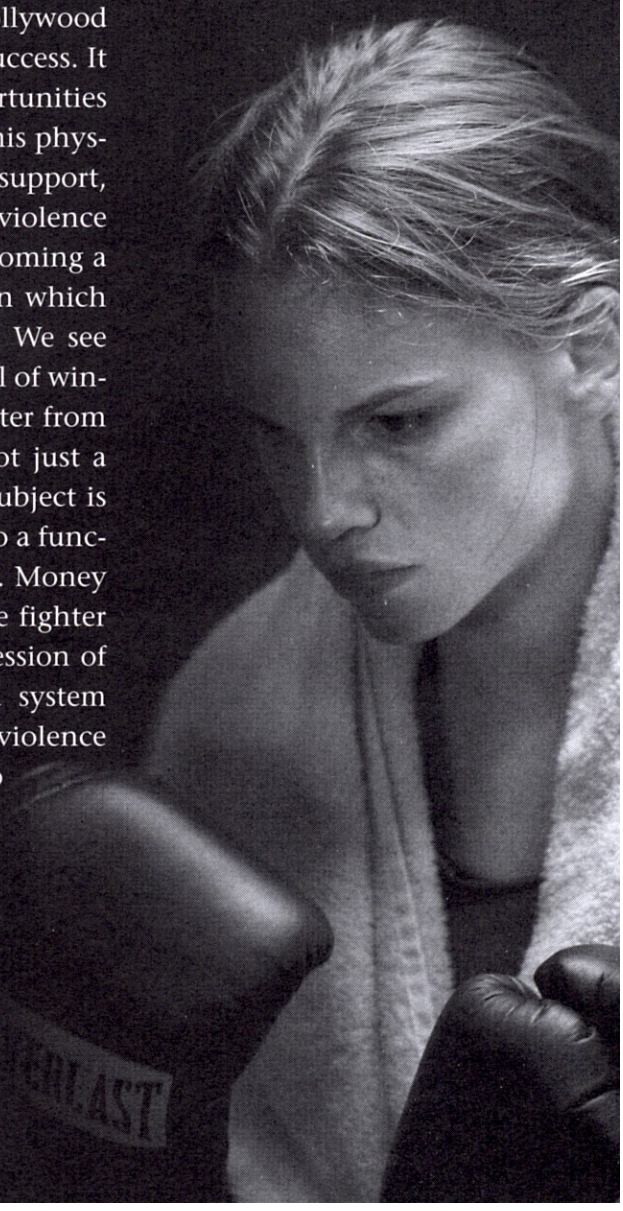
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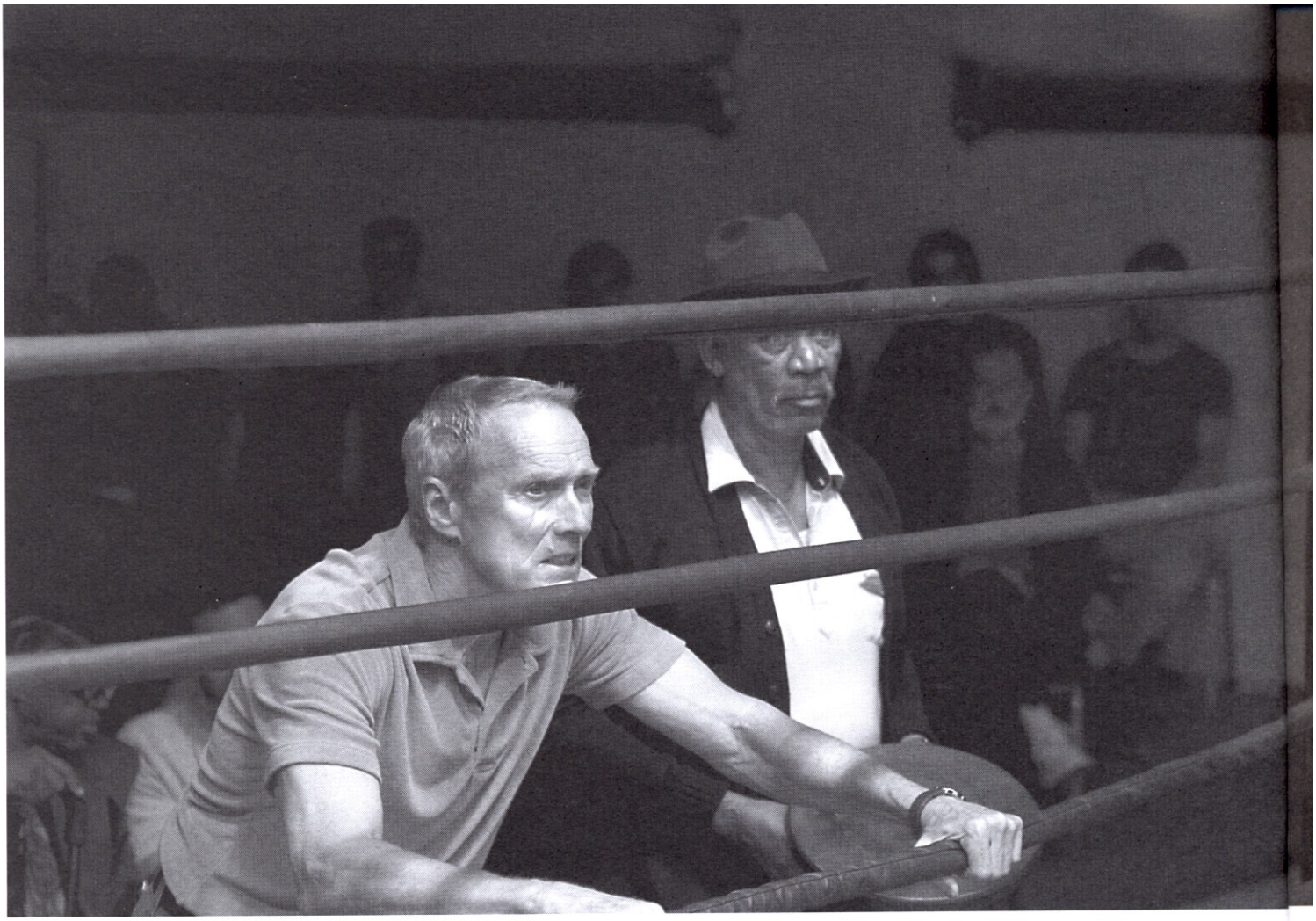
Violence, Actions and Words in *Million Dollar Baby*

by Edward Gallafent

BACKGROUND: Turning violence into money

An important part of the interest of the Hollywood boxing movie is as an American narrative of success. It charts the rise of a figure to whom few opportunities are open in that society, but who intuits that his physical being is such that he can, with the right support, devote himself to a socially licensed form of violence that will enable him to change his life, by becoming a champion. The films explore different ways in which that ambition is both realised and poisoned. We see the rewards: what cash will buy, fame, the thrill of winning. But in the words of a supporting character from *Body and Soul* (Robert Rossen, 1947), "He's not just a kid who can fight, he's money." A recurrent subject is that the success in the ring turns the boxer into a function of the money that circulates around him. Money ceases to be an index of the pleasures that the fighter is able to give or enjoy and becomes an expression of the degree to which he is trapped within a system designed to make profits for others. We see violence less public than boxing, that of the figures who are sometimes explicitly vicious gangsters (Eddie Fuseli/Joseph Calleia in *Golden Boy* (Rouben Mamoulian,1939), Roberts/ Lloyd Gough in *Body and Soul*) or at best businessmen indifferent to every thing but making money.





Some of the films dramatize the fighter's realisation of this, and his refusal of it, so that real success becomes turning your back on the crooked prizefighting game. One element of the crisis that brings this about can be the death of another boxer, either in the ring or as a result of taking punishment in it. This is not presented as just a matter of the innate violence of boxing, but is heavily associated with its corruption, with the indifference of the money men to everything but the figures. Abraham Polonsky's screenplay for *Body and Soul* provides its villain with the emblematic line: "Everything is addition or subtraction—the rest is conversation." In their conclusions these films redefine success not as earning or possessing a fortune, but realising the value of a world that has been given up, or risked, for it. This is the world of family and home: of good fathers (Mr Bonaparte/Lee J. Cobb in *Golden Boy*), enduring mothers (Anna Davis/Anne Revere in *Body and Soul*) and of the lovers of the fighter, the women who have also learned that they too value family over dollars (Lorna Moon/Barbara Stanwyck in *Golden Boy*, Peggy Born/Lilli Palmer in *Body and Soul*). One way of summing this up might be to say that these films are concerned with choices between good and bad parent figures, mostly but not always fathers, and that the boxing film is persistently concerned with the family and the couple.

Even in *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980), the issue of corruption briefly surfaces; the figure of the patriarchal fixer without whose influence it is impossible to arrange a title bout is present in Tommy Como/Nicholas Colasanto. Here the split between the ring and the home is different, in that Jake's/Robert de Niro's violence and his fantasies continually reduce the domestic world to debris. Despite this the idea of a happy family life remains potent, Scorsese locating its status as an inaccessible object of desire by presenting it as an image. Both the home movie sequences which are edited against some of Jake's 40s fights, and the photograph of the "happy family" which he asks the press photographer to take in the opening of the Miami sequence, express a vision of harmony which is almost never directly experienced by Jake. It is important to note that outside of Jake's paranoia, the home is treated with positive nostalgia: Vicky/Cathy Moriarty is in fact as sexually faithful a partner as Lorna and Peggy in the earlier films.

A recent version of the subject, *Cinderella Man* (Ron Howard, 2005), again preserves some of these elements; the indifferent businessman is now less explicitly a gangster, but money and the threat of death are present. While the figure of the faithful woman is retained, the family is much more sentimentalised, the critical parent figures replaced by winsome children.

To some degree all of these films are celebrations of the body, of its fitness, and the erotic spectacle of the fight. But there is always the knowledge that the peak of success can only ever be brief—even a champion will sooner or later be deposed by a younger or stronger fighter. So the films are also haunted by issues of injury, ageing and physical decline.



FATHERS AND CHILDREN:
losing a son, finding a daughter.

In its main plotline *Million Dollar Baby* (Clint Eastwood, 2004) presents very different views of the world that surrounds the fighter, both the private one of family, and the public one of the fight game. It begins with a subplot that acts as a prologue, and relates to some of the conventions that I have outlined.

The film opens with two men in a boxing ring, Big Willie Little/Mike Colter and his white opponent. After a few shots of the fighting the round ends, and we go to a corner where we see Frankie Dunn/Clint Eastwood, who is Willie's trainer/manager, stopping the bleeding from a cut next to Willie's eye. The ring doctor allows him one more round, and Willie goes on to win the fight.

A few moments later we are in the car park, outside the venue. Willie learns that although he has been offered a title fight, Frankie has turned it down: "two or three more fights, you'll be ready." Although Willie seems to accept this, the next time he is on screen there is some question of his talking to a new manager, and this is followed by a sequence in which he arrives at night at Frankie's house to tell him that he has moved to a manager who will give him a title fight. Finally we see this fight taking place on the television that Frankie is watching—Willie wins the fight, and is the new world champion.

There are several conventional elements to this story, such as the tale of success, of the achievement of stardom for a figure who is socially an underdog—it is clearly important that Willie is black. It situates the boxer's story as being about skills taught and learned (when he moves to the new manager, Willie points out to Frankie that he has already taught him all he needs to know). What distinguishes it from the examples I have considered is that there is no question of corruption here; the move to the new manager is not a matter of the boxer risking association with criminality. We might say, there is nothing for Willie to be rescued from apart from an over-cautious trainer/manager in the person of Frankie. Willie is presented as an honest worker in the boxing business, earning money from it to support a conventional family, a daughter taking music lessons, a new car for his wife. Yet in this consumer society the money that boxing brings isn't so easily converted into happiness. Willie's wife hates her new car, wants her old one (which Willie has sold) back; when Frankie manages this, we're told she is in tears.

There is the awareness that this career is dependent on the fighter's body and what it can be made to do. The opening voice over, which we may or may not recognise as the film starts to be that of Morgan Freeman, who will play Eddie "Scrap-Iron" Dupris, a fighter whose career ended with a bout in which he was blinded in one eye, stresses from the outset that intervention in bodily conditions is possible, but that it has limits: "sometimes there's just nothing you can do." Alongside this is age: Willie's decision to change manager is borne of a directly expressed anxiety about how long he will be physically at his peak. His speech of excuse to Frankie connects and sums up the anxieties about time and money: "If I win I've got to make as much as I can while I can...."

All this might suggest that the film will go on to offer a simple plot development in which the terms of Willie's story are revised. Frankie will take on another socially deprived hopeful to train and manage, but this pupil will not desert him, and Frankie, having learned his lesson, will not now withhold the title fight. The plot of the central part of the film, in which Frankie refuses, and then reluctantly accepts, the role of trainer/manager to a girl from backwoods America, Maggie Fitzgerald/Hilary Swank, seems apparently to meet this prescription. The narrative of the triumph of the underdog is retained, by replacing Willie's race with Maggie's social background. Maggie turns out to be a talented fighter, and a good pupil, just as Willie was, and the relation between trainer and pupil seems to offer some pleasures we are carefully invited to partake. A subplot of Frankie having lost touch with his own daughter seems designed to open the way to see Maggie as his substitute child, which is neatly dovetailed with her feeling for her dead father. So these two can seem each to be supplying the lost role for the other. As we know further that they are not blood relations, the possibility that a sexual connection could exist between them, or at least they imagine that had they been closer in age this might have been a happy ending to their story, floats around their relation, and this suggestion, our fantasy and/or theirs, is located in the film, in a way which seems neither crudely to promote or to deny it. (It might be appropriate to add here that the impact of this greatly depends on the performances, that both Swank and Eastwood successfully present these figures as charming, attractive and warm).

What then follows is a disaster, in that Maggie is critically injured in the course of her title fight, and becomes a quadriplegic and then evidently a dying woman. This could, I want to argue, be included inside a conventional reading of the film, albeit a sombre one: her death can be connected with the deaths in the ring that I discussed earlier, as another example of how despite its socially licensed nature, the violence associated with the ring can result in death. Maggie's story can be read as one of foul play (the illegitimate blow from the opponent) bad luck (falling on the stool that breaks her neck) and of denied triumph (the implication that she would have won the title otherwise).

I pose this reading in order to suggest how tempting it is, and to note that some parts of it—particularly the roles of Maggie and Frankie as daughter and father for each other—are so very clearly telegraphed. But I also want to suggest that it is not wrong so much as inadequate, in that it takes insufficient account of the vision of the America in which the events take place.

INCURABLE: the social background

Let us return for a moment to Maggie's social deprivation. This is her account of it, in one of her more eloquent speeches, delivered in the pivotal sequence in which Frankie is persuaded to train her:

> My brother's in prison, my sister cheats on welfare by pretending one of her babies is still alive, my daddy's dead and my mama weighs 312 pounds. If I was thinking straight, I'd go back home, find a used trailer, buy a deep fryer and some oreos. The problem is, this [boxing] is the only thing I ever felt good doing.

This is not a matter of noting sufficient deprivation to establish Maggie as an underdog. Unlike Willie, who is presented as having *only* his race to overcome, what is being described is a milieu of social violence which is in sharp contrast to the benign family of the conventional boxing movie.

The exploration of this comes after Maggie's rise to success. It opens with the sequence following her penultimate fight, in which Frankie and Maggie sit down to a meal. The mise-en-scène is interesting here—the ring where the next bout of the evening is taking place can be seen in the background to the luxurious table at which the couple are dining: we see it but they are apparently facing away from it, as if it is possible to turn your back on the business while—finally—reaping some of the material rewards and pleasures. It is here that Maggie proudly announces to Frankie that she has bought a house for her mother. Frankie tells her that she is a good daughter, and they agree to drive down to see her family and hand over the house.

In the next sequence, expanded by Eastwood and screenwriter Paul Haggis from a few telling lines of dialogue in the F.X. Toole story,[2] we see Maggie and Frankie arrive at the scruffy trailer park in which Frankie's mother Earline/Margo Martindale lives with her children, and the showing off of the gift of the modest house. The occasion is a disaster; the sight of the house sends Earline into a spiral of aggressive anxieties about her welfare, her medicare, her son who is about to be released from prison. In her view Maggie is not the salvation of the family: the very fact of her being able to earn money is negative, proposing as it does a image which threatens her assumptions of female passivity and male aggression. Even as she mistakes the shadow under Maggie's eye to be a blow from Frankie rather than a result of the fights (as Maggie patiently explains to her), Earline tells her daughter to "find a man...people hear about what you're doing and they laugh...."

What we are seeing is an America in which social violence (and prejudice regarding gender roles) is pervasive, in which issues of ignorance and fear are interlocking and intractable. It is such that money fundamentally cannot work to address it; the narrowness and selfishness that we are seeing is not treated as susceptible to cure. We might think back to Willie, and how this story differs from his world of bourgeois anxieties in which money was, at least in part, functional.

The presence of a baby in arms in the trailer park/new house sequence is important, in that the ability of money to reform lives is often represented through an idea of what can be done for children[3]. The presentation of Maggie's family is at an indicatively opposite pole to that of the family of the boxer Jim Braddock/Russell Crowe in *Cinderella Man*. There the success story of the boxer is set in the context of the economic depression of the thirties, but the family is configured as wife and three touching, vulnerable children, subject to threats of hunger and illness. Here is the supposedly pervasive social collapse, but also the sentimental picture of the family (and by implication the society) which *just* needs money to be successful/healthy/properly American, and one on which money will work.

Eastwood's film strikingly ignores the issues that circulate around the place of boxing in the social world. Maggie's rise to stardom is treated as simply a matter of a montage of fights that she wins. Unusually for a boxing film, *Million Dollar Baby* involves no shots of newspaper headlines, and has no interest in the reporting of boxing either in print or in the media. There are no significant figures who represent a public for her beyond those at the gym. Rather than showing her insertion into stardom taking her into a larger, or a riskier social world, the film treats it as unimportant. Notice, for example, the single stock shot of London used to establish that she is now fighting there, and the terms in which she is set up with an Irish context: Scrap comments "seems there are Irish people everywhere, or people who want to be...." The fact of her being accompanied to the ring by pipers, which has received some comment as being a slip in terms of presentation of Irishness[4] may be a more deliberate way of saying that the whole business is just a form of relatively crude showmanship, which Frankie is prepared to construct, but in which (apart from the name he has given Maggie) he has no deep investment.

We could connect this indifference to the place of the sport with attitudes to the specific business of women boxing in the film. This seems to touch on two anxieties, one being that such boxing clearly cannot operate as a display of conventional masculinity, but actually calls in to question that display. The other is that while still arguably erotic it no



longer operates as an unproblematic display of conventional femininity either (as Eastwood annotates by several times including in the fight sequences the stereotypically erotic girls who display the round numbers in the ring). These anxieties are not confined to the ignorant. Earline's comments about Maggie producing laughter can be connected to Frankie's initial judgement of women boxing as "the latest freak show out there." Both are expressive of the degree to which women boxing produces aversion because it undermines traditional categories of who is allowed to use, and to receive, violence, and both are conscious of it as a form of showbusiness.

I think that even in the film's moments of harmony and achievement these anxieties, and particularly anxiety on the part of men about what it means for the female body to be bloodied, always remain in the background. When Maggie is fatally injured we see Frankie suddenly turn on Scrap, blaming him for encouraging the relation between himself and Maggie "her being a girl, and all." The strangely archaic language—it sounds like William Munny from *Unforgiven* speaking—is illuminating, suggesting precisely that in this crisis Frankie cannot bear the violation of his piety that men should protect women from violence, not encourage them into it. The sequence relates so markedly to the recurrent preoccupations of Eastwood's films that it is not surprising to find that it has no original in the F.X.Toole stories.

WORDS AND ACTIONS: the book and the ring

If the good family is no longer available, and the film is not interested in the place of this kind of boxing in the larger social world, what is it interested in? In order to answer this we have to ask what other qualities the film gives to Maggie and Frankie, what kind of father and daughter they are.

The film defines the relation of trainer and fighter in Frankie and Maggie by locating it in the difference between a consciousness in which actions are always accompanied by words, and one in which actions, specifically wordless violence, replace words, or seem sometimes to offer a retreat from words. Frankie is the figure whose teaching of fighting is seen a part of a commitment to the spoken, or written; Maggie is the figure who takes his words and applies them through her actions in the ring. This is to an extent generically familiar, in that part of the specific nature of the violence in the boxing ring is that it is wordless, that the participants can exchange words before and after the fight, but almost never in it.[5] Considering how the film establishes Frankie's relation to words, we should note the following:

1. That from an early part of the film he is learning a foreign language (Gaelic). No reason for this is made clear.

2. That his response to his separation from his daughter is persistently to write letters to her, even though we see that the thick envelopes are returned unopened.

3. We learn that one of his amusements is to engage in theological arguments, or perhaps they should be called sessions of teasing, with his local Catholic priest.

4. That from his first scene with Maggie we know him to be fond of proverbs and admonitions, such as "tough ain't enough." He dismisses her with these words and much later we see them written on a sign in his office in the gym. The gym itself is plastered with similar signs. Later his repeated phrase is "always protect yourself." Scrap's comment on this is that "he likes to repeat himself."

5. He does of course show Maggie some physical moves, and we see him punching the air, but there is no point in the film in which he fights (as opposed to Scrap who fights and defeats Shawrelle/Anthony Mackie, a cocky young black fighter at the gym). A fight with Earline's ex-convict son, which is in the F.X.Toole story, is not used in the film.

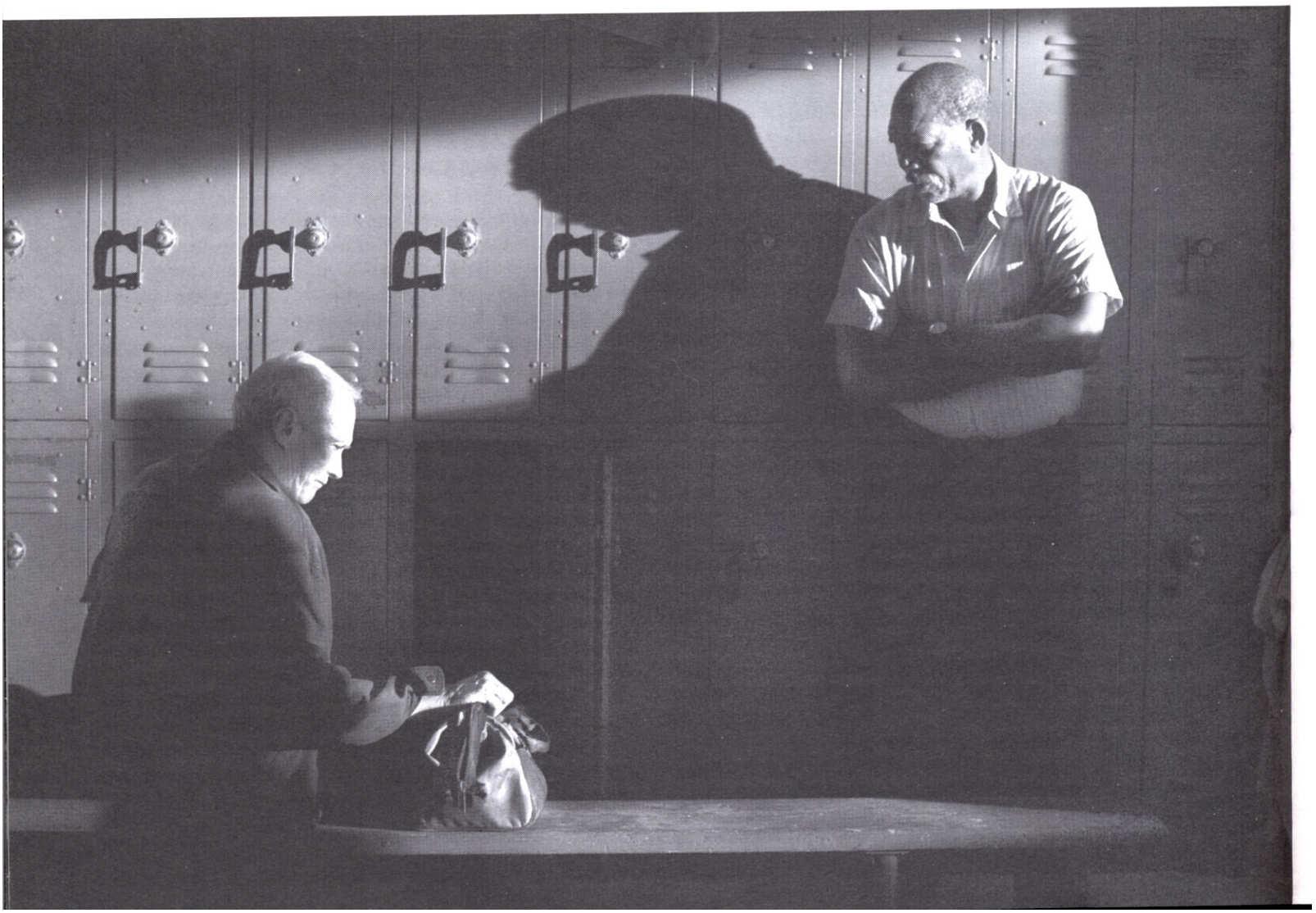
6. There is never any suggestion that Frankie was a boxer (again, as opposed to Scrap) before he was a trainer.

In contrast, the figure of Maggie is seen in the early scenes silently training with the punchbag or with the speedbag. We never see her with the other female fighters, her only relation to them being in her fights, where her preferred mode of winning is to knock the opponent out in the first few seconds of the fight. She prefers not to know what the words on her dressing gown mean, although she could of course easily find out, as she knows. We never see her with papers or letters of any kind, or newspapers or magazines featuring herself, until the family tries to force legal papers onto her prone body. Her claim is that she feels good only when fighting. Her only moment of contact with a man her own age that we see is one of aggression, the sequence in which she responds to teasing by Shawrelle with a sharply phrased sexual insult.

All this seems to establish Frankie and Maggie as a happy combination of word and action, a couple in which each complements the other. The moment at which this harmony is most clearly announced is in the London sequence, which contains a proposal of marriage that is both facetious and a statement of commitment:

> **MAGGIE:** (of a cockney who has just called her "love"): "If I win, do you think he'll propose?"
> **FRANKIE:** "You win, I'll propose."
> (There is a beat while the pair consider this, and Maggie smiles at him happily.)

We cannot be blind to the warmth of this, but we might also, read the implications that lie behind the facetiousness. Frankie and Maggie are at their most ideal playing with the



fantasy of their relation, while preserving it as that. There is no way of developing it, no place to take it, and arguably this is both their knowledge and Eastwood's view of the culture in which they live. It is interesting that this high point takes place in the training room in London—in other words, on the road—and I will return to this.

What does the accident mean? In the terms we have discussed, Maggie is instantly outside the success narrative—she is no longer a boxer, able to make money from her deployment of violence. She also moves from a context defined by tradition and the practises of the past (the gym) to one defined by modernity and the practices of current technologies (the hospital). The accident represents a shift from damages and injuries to the body which are retrievable or which will heal (Maggie's broken nose) to those which will not heal (her broken neck) or represent the irreversible deterioration of the injured body (her gangrenous leg). But most fundamentally the accident makes the difference between Frankie and Maggie disastrously evident and crucially important. He is a man of words and actions—she is a woman of actions, or she is nothing, or feels she is nothing.

After the accident, Frankie's behaviour can be read by seeing it as a continuation of his understanding of language and action. His wish for some kind of life together is marked by his reading aloud to her W.B.Yeats's poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree". The image represented by a building of a cabin in the wood relates of course to a group of famous American myths and texts, but the crucial point here is that these matters appear in American culture both as a series of actions—going off to live in the woods, and as a series of words—writing (say) *Walden*. The quadriplegic Maggie can share in the moment—"I could learn how to bake"—but the dominant note here is that the access to these fragments of civilisation goes along with the feeling that they both know that they cannot be enacted. What is left for Maggie are only words, and imagination.

Maggie is given one final act, albeit a negative one, which is the refusal to transfer her money to her greedy family. I think that two details are used to present it as a positive piece of action. One is her insistence that this is something that she will do without Frankie, family business from which she specifically asks him to absent himself. The other is the gesture of spitting out the pen that Earline has placed in her mouth, so that even in this extreme situation she can be seen making a final physical gesture to impress on the family her contempt for them.

PLACES FOR LIVING AND DYING: homes and hospitals

The final movement is initiated by the subject of the amputation of Maggie's gangrenous leg. We have a shot of one of Frankie's unopened, returned letters from the dead or lost daughter, which is followed by a shot of Frankie alone in Maggie's now-empty hospital room. For a moment the audience seeing the film for the first time might reasonably suppose Maggie to have died, but the shot is followed by a dissolve from the emptiness into the same image with Maggie returned to her bed after the operation. This cinematic effect seems to me nicely to state the knowledge that Maggie's death, although it may be some time coming, is a strong possibility which Frankie has to face. His response (refusing to admit it to himself, or possibly wishing to deny it to her) is that of the man of learning, producing the City College catalog and suggesting that she might like to go back to school. She answers it by picking up the story of her father and his killing of Axel the dog, directly asking him to end her life. When he refuses, she commits her final action, and one which again drives home the split between words and actions in the two of them, that of attempting suicide by biting into her tongue: she will silence herself for ever. It is nearly the end of their conversation—he now tells her the thing which defines him as her parent, as the one who named her (the meaning of the Gaelic name that he gave to her) in the same scene as he acknowledges that she is dead to the world, by giving her the injection that will kill her.[6]

I think this part of the plotting can only be understood by going back to think about the meaning of the story of the father and the dog; that is, the meaning that it has for Maggie. We might object, as Frank objects, to the invitation to put Maggie down like a dog, by saying that she is not an animal. But Maggie doesn't see this distinction, or think it important. (There may be a subtle, subdued reference to this early in the film, where we see Maggie take unused food from a table at the restaurant where she works, saying (redundantly, as no explanation has been sought) that it is for her dog. Later we see her trim and eat it, as if delicately to suggest that this distinction is not one that she cares to observe). When she is dying she remembers only the importance of a connection between her father and another creature. I think what is at stake here is a choice. It is between a sterile modernity, which will turn her death into a function of the machines that have supported her, a matter of no more than her presence or absence from a hospital room (in other words a matter of the imagery we have just seen used, a cliché of the cinematic presentation of death in hospital). Against this is posed an act which will at least connect her death to the past, to a world in which an act of mercy was still possible, and to the one person who has love for her.

I want to return now to the subject crucial to the boxing film with which I started, the physical presentation of something understood as a home. In an America defined by a loss of a sense of belonging, a world in which the family (both Frankie's and Maggie's) is fractured and alienated beyond hope of recall, the gym becomes home. This is early established by the moment when Maggie is in one of her first conversations with Scrap as the gym is closing up and she offers "I'll walk out with you?" He replies: "I am home" and shows her the domestic space he occupies at the gym. Her response is immediate and unaffected: "it's nice," she says warmly. Rather than contrasting with home, the gym becomes her home, as opposed to the room she occupies, which will strike Frankie later for its neglected shabbiness. (His own home is shown briefly, but it seems only a more expensive version of the same indifference). Clearly connected with this is Maggie's using money to purchase a home but not for herself, the disastrous attempt to make the gift of the house that I have already discussed. *Million Dollar Baby* offers an America

in which it is almost impossible to create a home, to have a place to go to, except of course in that place where American artists have always found one, in the imagination, in language and storytelling.

The traditional alternative to the ideal of the home is of course the image of the road, and we can also see how the film both promotes the road as a place of American contentedness, and marks its decline. I have suggested that Maggie and Frankie are most happy when they are on the road—the "proposal" scene in the London training room, or the moment when they stop on the road (after leaving Earline and the family to their own devices) at a roadside diner for a perfect slice of pie. What is interesting about these moments is that they are presented positively but that they are so fragmentary, as if the road now represented a lost form of life that can be recaptured only for brief moments, and which feels like an exercise in nostalgia, even as something almost surreal. Two images are important here: one is the exterior shot of the diner, with its evidently old fashioned sign, and the other is the moment at the gas station when Maggie looks across the forecourt at a little girl and a dog, as if she were hallucinating a happy image from her own past. This note is picked up in the last image of the movie, which looks like a shot through the window of a roadside diner (perhaps even the one we saw before) but is so murky and dark that we can make almost nothing out. It is as if Eastwood wants to end with the implication that this (wherever it is) is where Frankie has gone, but to suggest that the utopian world of the road is disappearing, becoming an image that is not quite available to us.

EASTWOOD: The darkening vision

Reflecting on this, it is not hard to see why Eastwood was attracted to this material, and how it can be connected with his earlier work. The figure of a woman who both commits acts of violence in a socially licensed context (that of a police officer) but who is finally killed while in that context takes us back as far as *The Enforcer* (James Fargo, 1976). There is a strong connection with *Unforgiven* (1992), emphasised both through the related music and by the casting of Morgan Freeman. *Unforgiven* is another film in which physical violence of which women are the victims stirs up a complex of feelings which include both pieties about women and appropriate ways of treating them, and a feeling that attitudes to these issues determine what civilisation, or the possibility of it, can be understood to be.[7] It is also interested in asserting the difference between what is due to humans and to animals, expressed in an exactly opposite sentiment: "Maybe we ain't nothing but whores, but we—by God, we ain't horses."

A further connection, where the link has to do specifically with showbusiness on the road and foregrounding the erotic spectacle of the woman, is with *Bronco Billy* (1980), by his own account one of Eastwood's most personal films. It is possible to see *Million Dollar Baby* as a deeply pessimistic revision of elements of the earlier film, in which the showbusiness spectacle of violence involving a woman now ends in disaster, and in which the malign forces that act against the Americans on the road and which are just defeated, or rather evaded, in that film, have now triumphed completely. A final link can be made to an almost forgotten Eastwood film, *Breezy*(1973), which is also a consideration of what possible relations can exist between a much older man and a young woman.

It is possible to see Maggie and Frankie as an exemplary couple for a vision of a contemporary America in which only the most fragmentary future can be projected. I have argued elsewhere[8] that a central recurrent trope in Eastwood's work is the initiating failure to save a woman from violence, to protect her, followed by a narrative in which we see the possibility of redemption through the protection or rescue of another woman or women. But in *Million Dollar Baby* Frankie can only keep telling Maggie to protect herself. The impossibility of saving the woman haunts the whole of the film, and her death effectively destroys Frankie: almost nothing can follow from it.

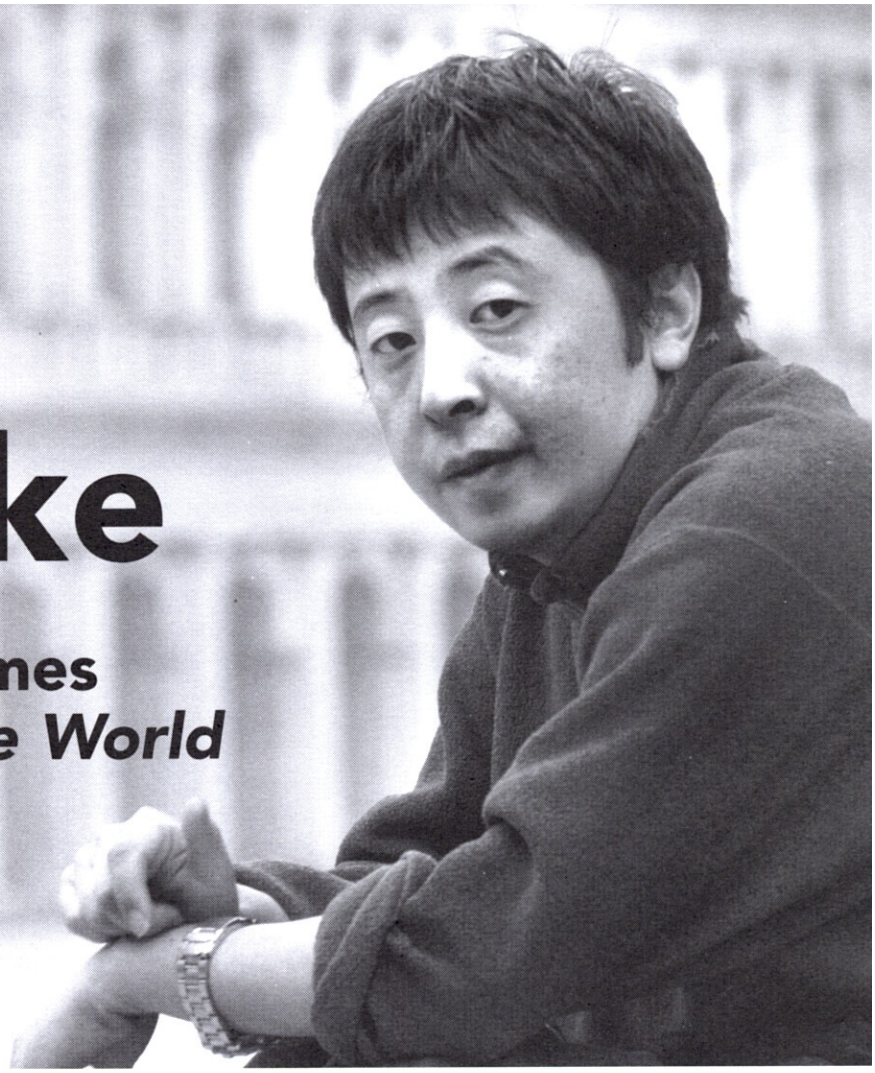
Is anything left? Two things. One is the gym, the film's only home, to which we return, and the figure of the wandering son who returns to it. This is Danger/Jay Baruchel, another lost child who was given refuge in the gym at the beginning of the story. This is a mark of it as a humane space and one where fantasies (Danger dreams fantastically of becoming a contender) can be accepted and treated kindly.

The other is an action, the act of storytelling itself. We are left with the final information that the voiceover from Scrap is not just a convenient technical device but an attempt to tell a daughter about a father, in that it is revealed that it is a communication to Frankie's lost daughter, an extension of Frankie's dead letters. There is of course no firm indication that there will be a listener, or a reader, of these words. (If the daughter were seen to have received them it would put her in the structural position of the second woman whose survival redeems the death of the first in Eastwood's works, but this is not what happens). We are left only with the value of the impulse to tell, to make the sorrows of the film's world bearable by seeing them put into this story.

Edward Gallafent *teaches film at the University of Warwick, England. He is the author of books on Clint Eastwood, on Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and on Quentin Tarantino (forthcoming).*

NOTES

1. My title quotation is from Isak Dinesen. It is quoted by Hannah Arendt as the epigraph to Chapter V "Action" in *The Human Condition* , Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958
2. *Million Dollar Baby* is based on materials drawn from a collection of short stories: F.X.Toole, *Rope Burns*, London, Secker and Warburg, 2000. Republished by Vintage in 2005 under the title *Million Dollar Baby*.
3. The originating text here is perhaps Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. In terms of film, a sequence such as the dedication of the Martini home at Bailey Park in Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* is representative.
4. See for example the comment on the Internet Movie Database site for *Million Dollar Baby*.
5. An exception to this rule, and a demonstration of how mistaken it is to break it, is *Cinderella Man*.
6. "A life without speech and without action is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men." Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 176
7. See my discussion of this in Edward Gallafent, *Clint Eastwood: Actor and Director*, Studio Vista, 1994, pp. 217-28
8. *Clint Eastwood: Actor and Director*, pp. 231-237



INTERVIEW

Jia Zhangke

Life and Times beyond *The World*

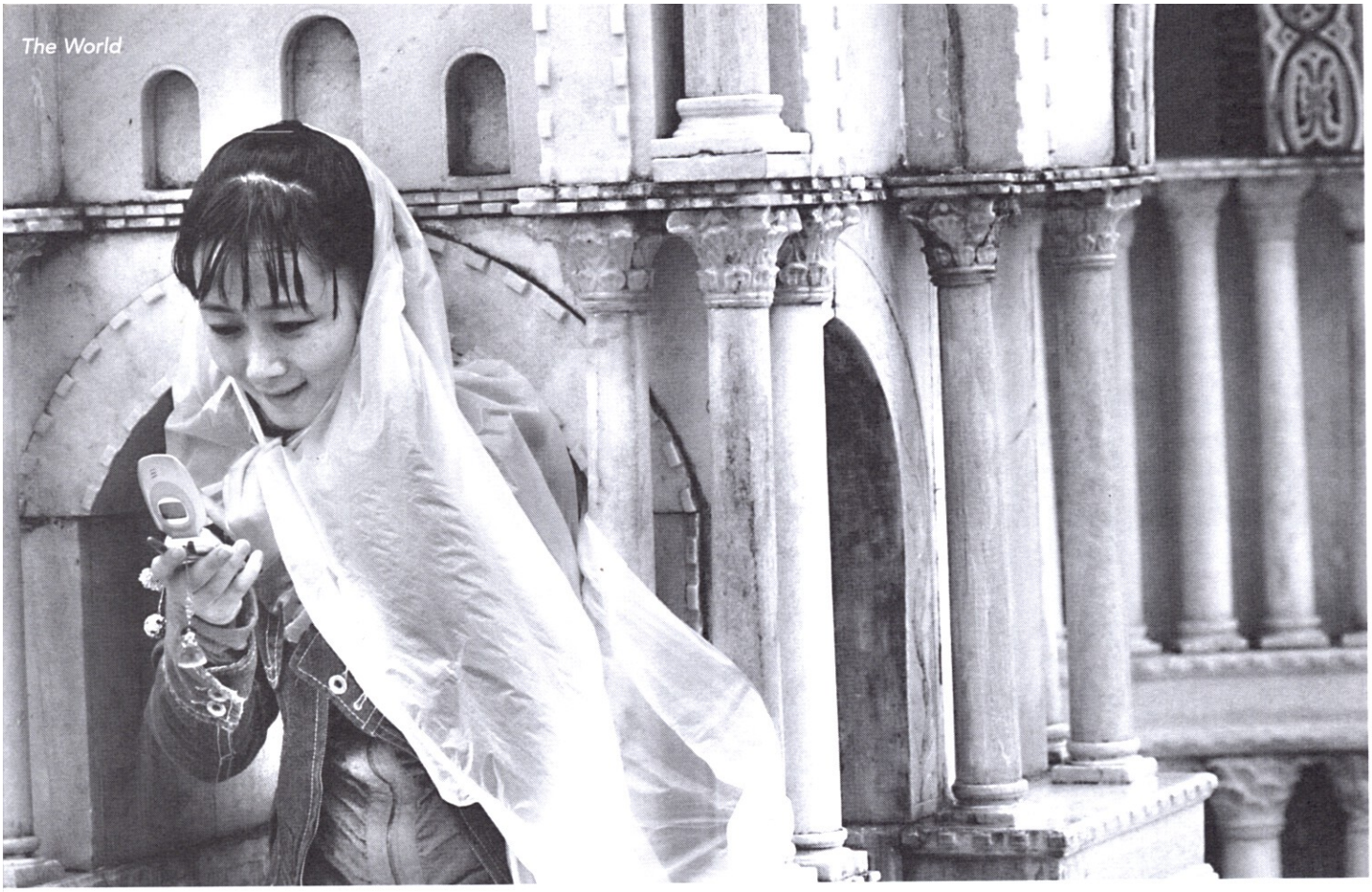
By Alice Shih

The following article has been assembled from material gathered during three conversations I had with Jia, between September,2004 and August, 2005. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and I'd like to thank Winny Zhang for transcribing the Chinese text.

ALICE SHIH: Jia, I know that your career started with shorts. Can you tell us about your first short, *Xiao Shan Going Home*?

JIA SHANGKE: That was in1996 when I was still at the Beijing Film Academy. About 10 of us in the class formed the "Independent Experimental Film Group". We gathered a little money, and started making very low budget shorts. At the time, our first project was *Xiao Shan Going Home*, which I wrote and directed. After the film was completed, a fellow classmate from Hong Kong told me that The Hong Kong Arts Centre was hosting an Independent Shorts Competition and wondered if I would be interested. I said yes and he submitted the film for me. It was selected for competition and went on to win the first prize in the narrative film category. I was then granted the opportunity to go to Hong Kong.

The real prize of my Hong Kong trip was not the golden award; it was the friendship that I found in my three long term working partners. My cinematographer Yu Lik-Wai is from Hong Kong and had just finished his studies in Belgium. He was impressed by my film and we decided to team up. Li Kit-Ming was another one. He was a producer for my three films*: Xiao Wu/Pickpocket* (1997), *Platform* (2000)and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) The third one was Chow Keung who helped produce *Platform* ,*Unknown Pleasures* and *The World* (2004). Our Hong Kong-China team formed a strong bond. We made six films in seven years: four directed by me and two by Yu Lik-Wai. We almost had one



film per year, and we complemented each others' job. When I made a film, Yu would shoot it, and Li and Chow would produce. Whereas when Yu directed, I would act as his producer. I found this an invaluable working relationship, as I got to learn what was involved in the process, and appreciate the tremendous help that they offered me. In the past, people from mainland China like me had the wrong impression of people from Hong Kong. We thought of them as busy gold-diggers who couldn't care less about culture. After knowing these Hong Kong friends, my feelings turned around completely. They taught me so much! From them I learned fundamental things like, "Solve your own problems".

AS: You are from Shanxi, and your previous films were all about this rural province. Yet the background of *The World* is "World Park", a theme park in metropolitan Beijing.
JS: Yes, there are two theme parks. The other one named "Window of the World" is in Shenzhen, and both are large.

AS: Since your earlier stories were about backward and desolate places, what made you switch your interest to tell stories of a big city, which surprising enough, turned out to be just as devastating?
JS: I haven't abandoned stories about small towns, but this time I wanted to focus my viewpoint on big cities. Since the early 1990s, after Beijing succeeded in winning the Olympics bid, China has been urbanizing at a tremendous speed. I feel that Beijing is undergoing massive changes everyday, to the point of absurdity. I could come home at night and see a building outside; then the next morning when I stepped out, that building was gone, demolished overnight! Or I would come home after two weeks on the road and find bus stops had been relocated or had ceased to exist. These constant changes made me really want to shoot a film about Beijing. I left my hometown Fenyang, a small town in Shanxi in 1993, to attend the Beijing Film Academy. I've lived through the changes in Beijing for more than a decade, adjusting to city living and urban interactions that had been all new to me.

I also find that there are lots of migrants in Beijing. It used to be difficult to relocate; we have a "HuKou" (Household Registry) system in China. Unless you were posted elsewhere for military service or you attended university, where you were born was where you lived for the rest of your life. Ever since the newly adopted open policy, this restriction has been lifted and the masses are flocking to the big cities which need a rapidly expanding labour force. The big cities are also transformed as more resources are pooled together. If you want to pursue a better living and a decent job, you are more likely to find it in a big city. Therefore, I see the massive wave of migrants as a really important issue. As for me, I was also one

of the migrants who arrived in Beijing from a small town. It was not an easy process. We went under a lot of pressure. This situation has prompted me to make a film about this process, but I didn't have a clear viewpoint as to how I should approach it.

It wasn't until *Unknown Pleasures* was going to Cannes and our cast and crew had to stop over in Shenzhen en route to Beijing, that my actress Zhao Tao told me that she had worked in the theme park "Window of the World". She was a dancer there for a year before she was accepted into the Beijing Dance Academy. She told me what it was like living in the theme park, her feelings, thoughts and her experiences. It clicked, and I found where I should stand to observe the cities, as well as life in China. "World Park" is a strange place. We entered and were transported in an instant to the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, Rome or Manhattan, but in fact it was only an illusion, further removed from reality. It was sending mixed messages, and it was hard to express the melancholy merely with words. As research, I often went to observe the visitors. I saw families from small towns having fun and enjoying themselves, but I felt a deep sorrow instead, knowing that was how fellow Chinese try to encounter the world.

AS: Some critics classify your work as art films. The general movie audience which is used to commercial films might find the pacing of your films too challenging. I found *The World* more accessible than your previous works. Was it ever your consideration to make your films more accessible, especially to the Chinese public?

JS: I long for a bigger Chinese audience, but I feel that it is the contemporary atmosphere in China that dictates my style. We are facing a social reality of unique chaos and conflicting messages. Our regional differences are driving us further and further apart. What we see now in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and especially Shanghai, we could say that these modern cities are in pretty good shape, but if you travel to a rural area in the mountains, you could see that the residents are still pretty much living in the "past". Not only is this city/country contrast extreme, the gap between the rich and the poor is also widening. Therefore I can't simply portray this phenomenon on the surface. I need to concentrate, and slowly seep through the cracks of this social reality by close observation. This process calls for patience and concentration.

As in the beginning of *The World*, there are some hints to help the audience explore this clueless world. Slowly, we get to enter the two leads' inner world, and gradually step into their individual space. This story has a lot of characters, and I'd been looking for a new narrative structure. I was going to follow the leading couple linearly, but then I realised that might be problematic to see China through just the two main



Forbidden Pleasures

characters. The advantage of this approach is simple, the audience would easily accept the story of a couple falling in love in the Park, conflicts arising and in the end, failure to resolve the problem. But I was sceptical of the effectiveness of this simple relationship in revealing the situation now in China.

Then it dawned on me that I could use the "Link" method, as in the computer world. Say I want to find Tao; I look up her information, from there I find Taisheng, and onwards to his hometown pal, followed by the Russian. It's just like surfing on the web via Links. It's a very effective way of linking up characters; they could be from anywhere and any social stratum. The film also used text messages several times as a communication method, including Flash animation. It seems to me that people are being reduced to numbers; I find this phenomenon is very prominent in China. I don't understand why young people in China rely so much on cell phones, followed closely by computers. Even in rural towns, internet cafés are so popular. People may be making very little money, but they must have a cell phone! This phenomenon is more intrusive in Asia than in Europe or Canada. Therefore, I decided to work all these elements into film language, to explore and investigate this phenomenon. I understand that the audience may find this film form unfamiliar, they are not used to this form of narration; but if they were able to get into the film's world and feel the characters' emotions, this film would not only be accessible, it would be quite a pleasure to watch.

AS: Unlike your previous works, this film is full of vibrant colour, but it does come complete with song and dance like your other films. Do you like to apply music to create an alternate mood for another emotion to brew?

JS: Very well put! In fact, all my films have song and dance. This is completely subliminal. I didn't set out to write it that way; it felt like it needed song and dance and I just penned it. It came from life experiences when I was young. I thought of us Chinese as a race not skillful in expressing ourselves, our opinions or our emotions. We tend to bury our thoughts inside, not letting others know. When the going gets tough, we would become very quiet. But suddenly we would burst



Platform

into song as we walk along. I find song or dance can be a form of expression for the introverted, it doesn't only belong to expressive personalities, the quiet type also relies on them.

This includes Tao in *The World*. Dancing is her job; it's also her way of escaping reality. When she is dancing on stage, it may seem monotonous doing the same show day in, day out. In reality, she finds a tunnel to a virtual world, like Flash or the worldwide web. Her work serves as a way to discharge her loneliness; it's also a means of expressing her loneliness. For me, dance is one of the earliest ways people used to create a virtual world.

Unlike real intimate physical contact, all that cell phones or computers can create is a virtual voice or a world of text and images. They seem to have expanded ways of communication and convenience, but they actually keep people further apart and lonelier.

AS: *The World* was chosen to close the 2005 Hong Kong International Film Festival. This was the first time ever for any of your films to screen on Chinese soil. It then opened in mainland China theatrically. How did you feel?

JS: I felt that I had finally come back to my own stage! My first three films all failed to pass the Chinese censorship board and weren't permitted to screen in China. This has pained me deeply. My films are about the Chinese, our lives and emotions, yet they can't be seen by us. It's like shouting out loud on the mountain, and there is no echo. It feels very empty. Ever since *XiaoWu*, my films have been recognised internationally, yet, these positive responses can never replace the feedback of the Chinese audience. Their non-existent comment could not generate any kind of cultural dialogue. A few years ago, the Chinese audience could finally see my films through pirate DVDs in the black market. This created an embarrassing situation for me. I knew I wouldn't be getting any revenue in return, yet they offered the Chinese audience the only way of accessing my films.

AS: Now that your director status is restored, this will no longer be a problem, right?

JS: Yes. I was banned from January 13, 1999, but I persisted and made *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures*. Over the last decade, other directors who insisted on independent views and productions were also banned from making films. I was the first banned director to be reinstated in 2004 after many years of struggle and campaigning. Chinese directors advocated for the transformation of the film industry and the policy gradually loosened up. The Chinese government reconsidered the functions and role of movies. Films are now considered to be national properties, and to be treated as an economic tool, different from the previous definition of a propaganda tool. Under these new circumstances, banned directors like me are gradually being reinstated, and our films are gradually permitted to meet the public.

AS: I don't think the fifth generation directors had the same problems. When they first started out in their careers, the state-run studios were supportive. The sixth generation directors like you had to go underground. What other challenges is this group facing together?

JS: I think our generation faces the same problem of production financing. (The fifth generation) started their careers when our country was still planning for economic reform. Their films were strong in experimentation with an attitude. Films like Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984)and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorgum* (1987)were produced by state-run studios. The whole country was behind them, from funding to sales. Basically they acted as the spokespeople for the mainstream attitude at the time.

Our generation of directors started our careers in the 90s, when the government tightened its attitude and policies for political reasons. For those who cared about social conditions and wanted to depict our lives on screen, we were subjected to enormous resistance. The rise of a market economy in China also happened simultaneously, and the state-run studios wouldn't produce and package films from start to finish anymore. Young directors were also reluctant to work within the government's system and mandate. It drove us to a new type of film production. We had to look for private investment and distribution channels to fund our independent productions. This difference in financing is the main disparity between our two generations.

From a creative collective point of view, I don't agree calling us post-90s directors in a group as the sixth generation. It's already fifteen years and they still think of us as one generation? That's not appropriate! You can actually see big differences within our films.

AS: How was *The World* received in China? And how do you feel the Chinese audience connects to your film?

JS: It didn't do too well theatrically, but DVD revenue is pretty good. We sold more than 300,000 legitimate copies.

I'm sure a big fraction of the audience is unfamiliar with films of this nature at the beginning. Films like mine haven't been seen by the Chinese public in nearly fifteen years. After the film was released, an intense discussion emerged in China. It touched on all the topics I explored and focused on observing the problems in reality.

I don't think the old-timers even recognise these problems as their own. I think it's their attitude in life. They may not share the same income or rank as the characters in my film, but their problems are all related. The film has been quite well received by university students, who contributed in-depth critiques to various web sites which generated insightful analysis. This type of discussion leads to more public awareness. The working class could really identify with the pain experienced after seeing my film, but for those who have moved up, or the privileged class, they wouldn't want to look back at the livelihood of this unfortunate social stratum.

AS: What's your next project?

JS: I'm working on a documentary called *Still Life*. This film is shot in the rural mountainous area in northern China. There are three characters in the story; two are from Shanxi and one from the Three Gorges of the Yangtse area. One is a coal miner, the second one is a homemaker and the last one is a boat operator. They are not related to each other. The story is about those who stay in small towns and fail to make it in the big cities. It's not like paparazzi exposing big events

while they happen, but very candid and casual, very close to daily lives. I take *Still Life* as the sister-film of *The World*, two faces of the mirror with two film forms, one documentary and one narrative. This is my second time doing documentaries; *In Public* (2001) was my first.

AS: How do you feel re-visiting documentary film-making now? What's the main difference?
JS: I can see that the structure has gotten bigger. When I was doing *In Public*, I was shooting in one city and one location, which was the coal mine. Now I'm operating across provinces, a vast difference in terrain, structuring several unrelated individuals in dispersed areas together in a film. But the characters I chose in my documentaries are all people that I like. From what we see of them, we can understand the residents and the living conditions in the mountains.

AS: What do you think is the most important difference between documentaries and narrative films?
JS: I think documentaries can capture a state of natural human realism. How you face people in real life and how you get along with each other. How to record the essence of living is very challenging. Narrative films are after all a product of imagination, or our impression of life. They are the cinematic productions of our observations and analysis of life, through structured characters and their structured relationships.

Shooting documentaries requires an open attitude. I'm no longer imagining life, I'm understanding life. Life tells me what the situation really is and life goes on. These are two totally different creative practices. Documentaries can be more intricate as we're facing real situations. We need to have extra rational, ethical and cultural judgement to develop a relationship with the environment and the subjects. To get to know them in depth is a sincere process.

I'm hoping to wrap shooting *Still Life* in September '05, and start editing while I begin pre-production for *Tattoo Times*. Zhao Tao will play a nurse and Wang Hong Wei, a hooligan. The story is adapted from a novel by Su Tong about jobless youths who turn into hoodlums in Suzhou around 1975. We see the living conditions in China at the time through their lives.

AS: That sounds very similar to the world in *Xiao Wu*.
JS: The situation is more severe, as they were a violent gang.

AS: What do you think went wrong in China that caused these youth problems?
JS: Education. A lot of problems in China are actually related to the education system. The system still retains numerous negative elements from the old days. For example, interpersonal relationships seem unchanged. The education of the spirit, in the philosophy of class struggle and absolute power, continues to pose some serious problems. I feel education carries extra importance for someone who has modern insight. Yet, education is only an element. The most important problem is the system; it's a systematic problem and education is only a component. If the system changes, allowing more personal freedom and power; it may improve.

AS: I'd like to ask you a personal question. Not too long ago, you were just an ordinary Chinese kid from a small town. Because of your talent and diligence, you got the privilege to see and experience the outside world. I'm sure you got to learn a lot from those experiences. As you've discussed in *The World*, most of the people in China who want to see the outside world have been denied this precious opportunity. What have you learned that you find the most valuable, and how are you going to put this in your future films, to enlighten the under-privileged?
JS: What I learned and want to share with fellow Chinese is one important message: "People are the same everywhere." It doesn't matter if you live in Beijing, Paris, Toronto or Africa; you are facing the same fundamental challenges. In the past, recognizing the differences in wealth and culture across nations, I thought that the contents in our lives were miles apart; but now I discover that it's all very similar. This is the most important message I want to convey to the Chinese audience.

Although the story in *The World* is about youth in China, in fact, it could happen anywhere. "The World is only a corner, and a Day is as long as a year." Sometimes what happens in a day is a snapshot of a life. People are the same all over the world; they go through the same motions. They face the same spring, summer, fall and winter; the same birth, ageing, illness and death. I don't know what this revelation does to me exactly, but it seems to make me stronger. This personal experience strengthens me to endure the heavy stress in life. I feel that I'm not alone. My humble experiences are not unique. It's not "Why is this happening to us Chinese?" No, what I'm experiencing could happen to anyone in the world. This knowledge can make us more optimistic and stronger.

This is also an issue I brought up with the Chinese censorship board. They were particularly upset by the young Chinese directors who portrayed sadness and pain on screen. I felt that there are so many layers in life, even people have layers. There is this happy Jia Zhangke on the surface, but underneath lies a painful counterpart. There are many angles for exploration. I'm willing to pool all my resources as well as spirit to tell these sad stories. By watching this imperfect world, we can become stronger and more optimistic of change. The censorship board failed to see it through this perspective. It's not by shooting a luxurious and happy world that we can affect the audience. It's important to keep criticising culture and our society; it provides a vivid description of human difficulties. I'm going to carry on making this kind of film, in the hope that audiences will be strengthened to face daily life.

I'm particularly fond of a Chinese writer named Liu Heng. He has written a lot of screenplays, like Zhang Yimou's *Ju Dou* (1990)and *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992). After reading Lu Xun, he wrote a line that struck a chord in me. He said, "Lu Xun uses his bitter boredom to discharge my bitter boredom." I really like this expression.

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2005 TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

The Sun

BY ADAM NAYMAN

Gus Van Sant has cited the work of the Russian director Alexander Sokurov as a major influence on his current aesthetic project, and the formal similarities are readily apparent. Since *Gerry* (2002), Van Sant's films have been organized largely around single take sequences and extended tracking shots, techniques often employed to startling effect by Sokurov throughout his career.

There is also a deeper resonance. Sokurov's films are famously concerned with the notions of distension and duration. Their often punishing long takes represent more than a mere formal strategy: the unbroken, extended shots express the director's preoccupation with the ebb and flow of history. In the art-house hit *Russian Ark*, Sokurov traverses several centuries' worth of Russian civilization in the space of one remarkably elaborate tracking shot through the Hermitage museum in St. Petersburg. This crystalline integration of form and content is also at the heart of Van Sant's recent project—the Olympian detachment of *Gerry* isolates its characters within a vast physical and temporal expanse, while the distanced camerawork of *Elephant* (2003) works to suggest the unnavigable gulfs between its teenaged characters.

This year, both filmmakers produced films meant to conclude established trilogies. Van Sant directed *Last Days* (2005), a loosely fictionalized account of Kurt Cobain's 1994 suicide that premiered at the Cannes Film Festival. Van Sant's previous two films, *Gerry* (2002) and *Elephant*, were both intended as treatises on death—murder by a friend, and murder by a stranger, respectively—while *Last Days* focused on the process of taking one's own life. Sokurov's trilogy, meanwhile, is considerably less abstract. In *Moloch* (1999), Sokurov imagined the private unraveling of Adolf Hitler, and *Taurus* (2001) is a portrait of Lenin's sad, isolated dotage. *The Sun*, which also debuted this past spring at Cannes, examines the virtual house arrest of Emperor Hirohito during the US occupation of Japan at the end of the Second World War.

The similarities between these historically and culturally disparate films are striking. Both are set in large, empty mansions and concern individuals weighted down by implications of godliness. The difference of course, is that while Cobain has only posthumously occupied the position of pop-culture saint, Hirohito was literally revered as a God for most of his life by the Japanese population. Accordingly, Van Sant's film feels painfully forced in its feature-length attempt to confer transcendence on a figure unsuited to such lofty intentions. *The Sun*, meanwhile, works effectively in the opposite direction: it compassionately—and rather audaciously—presents Hirohito as a palpably human being, readily embracing his fall from grace.

The Emperor is played by Issei Ogata, an actor familiar to audiences for his appearance in Edward Yang's *Yi Yi* (2000). In that film, Ogata essayed a likeable, Bill



Emperor Hirohito/Issei Ogata

Gates-like computer magnate, but there's no trace of that easy affability here. His Hirohito is a portrait of strait-jacketed awkwardness. His gestures are stiff, and his chronically trembling lips often struggle to produce words—an amazing metaphor for thoughts left unspoken. Ogata's brilliant performance suggests a kind of institutionalized behavior—he's been neutered by his relentlessly ritualized day-to-day existence. Even as his country crumbles around him, he is attended by servants and generals alike, whose purpose is to isolate their godhead against the fiery realities just beyond his ornately appointed offices.

The opening movements of *The Sun* feel purposefully dulled. Hirohito is presented as a mostly reactive figure, enduring agonizing strategy sessions with his increasingly apoplectic military advisers. His interest is piqued by his forays into marine biology—chatting up a researcher in his own personal lab about the minutiae of the hermit crab, he seems truly engaged. It is the first indication in the film of Hirohito as a person rather than a carefully attended persona, and thus does the film's major arc emerge: as his country's situation steadily worsens, Hirohito slowly begins to reclaim his humanity.

The slow transformation is presented at a typically Sokurovian remove. The muted colors and hazy, indistinct cinematography undercut intimate identification. It is telling that the most vivid sequence in the film is also the most intensely subjective: Hirohito's fevered hallucination of the chaos beyond his walls. A nightmare CGI vision of fish-bomber hybrids swirling above blazing cities, it seems imported from yet another trilogy: Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*. This powerful evocation of Hirohito's frenzied psyche is left purposefully brief. Despite its placement early in the film, it is a climax of sorts—an indication of the man's empathy for his people and horror at the terrible fallout (literal and figurative) of the direction in which his decisions have taken them. For the remainder of the film, the Emperor's interior life will be communicated by external observations, but the memory of this fever dream still lingers.

The remainder of *The Sun* pits Hirohito in an absurd comedy-of-manners struggle with the US military men who are ostensibly his conquerors but act more like his bemused keepers. The American soldiers, when they appear, are largely indistinguishable from one another, and speak in short, terse sentences—offered the unprecedented opportunity to photograph Hirohito in his garden, they regard him with paternalistic condescension. There is a general, never named, who is meant to represent Douglas MacArthur, but the actor (Robert Dawson) looks nothing like the famous General. Sokurov's refusal to clarify the Americans' identities—or, indeed, exactly when the film is taking place—reinforces the almost halcyon sense of disorientation.

Hirohito's meetings with the MacArthur figure, whose forced politeness belies his obvious impatience in prompting his rival's unequivocal surrender, are supremely uncomfortable. At first, it appears that Hirohito has been cruelly humbled, but slowly, we realize that humbleness is his wont. The American seems to notice it, too, and his tactics become increasingly gentle—the God is being treated with kid gloves. The semantically Byzantine discussions give way to a moment of blindsiding clarity: the general excuses himself from the room and then watches surreptitiously as the Emperor undertakes a self-conscious, surprisingly spry one-man waltz about the room.

There is a dignity and grace to the movements that suggest not so much a man driven out of his mind by the unimaginable stress of his position as the real Hirohito emerging, halting, but increasingly sure-footed, after a period of imposed hibernation. (He looks very much like the graceful narrator of *Russian Ark* sashaying blithely through the Hermitage.)

The ostensible key moment of *Last Days* finds its Cobain manqué literally elevated to heaven—a bold but pretentious gesture that rings hollow. Hirohito's private dance towards the end of *The Sun*, meanwhile, is less concrete in its meaning but nevertheless feels powerfully rapturous. Sokurov's aesthetic has always exemplified formal control, but *The Sun* is ultimately a study in unexpected and rapturous release.

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Takeshis'

BY ANDREW TRACY

In one of those marvels of synchronicity that can only be brought about by the extraordinary lags of cultural exchange, an exceedingly rough translation of Casio Abe's 1994 critical study *Beat Takeshi vs. Takeshi Kitano* appeared in North America shortly before Kitano's latest film, *Takeshis'*, arrives to lend remarkable credence to Abe's meta-musings. Drawing primarily upon the Japanese audience's intimate familiarity with Kitano as a television personality (understood only at second-hand by the majority of his audience in the West), Abe posits a split between the actor-object "Beat Takeshi" and the director Takeshi Kitano, the latter repeatedly "suiciding" the former in the cinema in revolt against Kitano-the-object's appropriation and homogenization by television. It's indeed curious that, for a filmmaker who relies so often on his own iconic person and who is certainly no stranger to self-regard, Kitano has carried on an increasingly complex and contradictory dialogue with self-effacement. *Dolls* (2002) removed Beat Takeshi from the picture altogether as Kitano tripped down the primrose path of perfumed art-house fare, while *Zatoichi* (2003) exploited its actor-object's iconography to the *nth* degree in seeking out commercial rewards, yet also seized every opportunity to divert attention from its supposed centre and seek out divergent streams of character, narrative, and rhythm. While these previous films toyed with dispensing with the figure of Beat Takeshi, *Takeshis'*, as its title makes plain, brings that troubled locus front and centre in all its complex multiplicity, a far more splintered vision than Abe's two-way split. In addition to Kitano as "himself," arrogant television and *movie star*, and as his *doppelganger*, a meek shop clerk and aspiring actor, there exists also the autonomous creature of Beat Takeshi the *movie icon* (the suited, gun-wielding gangster, not the television clown), and the implicit "real" Kitano, the creator behind the camera who may be as much a fabrication as his onscreen incarnations.

That Kitano as television personality is largely absent from the film indicates that the sense of entrapment which Abe

locates in Kitano's struggle against his "televisionesque body" has extended to his cinematic other. If Abe located an intra-national dialogue in Kitano's cinema, *Takeshis'* takes Kitano's internal/external identity crisis to the international stage. Mainly rejected at home, Kitano the cinema artist has managed to attain prevalence over Takeshi the televised clown in the West, his evidently preferred self winning out: when "Kitano" and his doppelganger first meet in *Takeshis'*, the latter is dressed as a circus clown, and the smirking star derisively signs his double's autograph book "To Mr. Clown." Yet Kitano's international acceptance as artist is still tied inextricably to the body of the Beat, in his modified incarnation as action star—another type of clown, subjected to a devastating parody in *Takeshis'* when "Kitano" films a scene for his latest film—due both to the stubborn persistence of corporeality (no matter how many times he is "suicided" on screen, the Beat recurs in film after film) and the dictates of commercial reality: the Beat-less *Dolls*, *Kids Return* (1996) and *A Scene by the Sea* (1991) have never received a proper release in North America. That *Zatoichi*, a domestic hit in Japan, flopped across the Pacific is irrelevant: the only way Kitano's art can traverse the world is in the increasingly (self-)despised vessel of the Beat's televisionesque—and now cinematized—corpus. The opening scene of *Takeshis'*, with Kitano as a prone WWII-era soldier facing down the barrel of a rifle held by a stone-faced American GI, hammers home with unmistakable symbolic blatancy how much Kitano's internal psychodrama has become intertwined with his interactions with the global market.

Any attempt to reduce *Takeshis'* to psychopathological document or specimen for postmodern dissection should be quickly abandoned, however. Kitano belongs to the cinema, not the classroom, and his film about frustration, impotence, and dead-ends paradoxically stands as one of his most impressively intricate efforts, even as its free-wheeling absurdity marks it as one of his most purely entertaining. The exacting precision which Kitano usually invests in his cutting and image-making here migrates to his control of narrative, usually the least important attribute of his films. Characters, identities, storylines, motifs and lines of dialogue—a stubborn button, a yakuza/ wannabe actor, an older man who utters "I'm not doing this for the money," an audition scene which is replayed in "reality" and innumerable other



instances—intersect, overlap and recur in increasingly inventive, and hilarious, contexts until the superimposition of these various "realities" dissolves the narrative into an interplay of purely formal elements. Kitano performed a similar operation in *Zatoichi*, playing against the genre even as he satisfied its demands, but *Takeshis'* comparable lightness is ultimately left far behind by its much darker project.

It would be no insult to Kitano to call him the most careerist major filmmaker working today, precisely because his best work, as well as his worst, is a result of the tension between Kitano's art and his own brand name, face, and body—even when physically absent from his films, his inimitable presence pervades our memory and tints our viewing. All of Kitano's filmic output is predicated upon the product that is the man himself, and paradoxically, the wholesale commodification of Takeshi/Kitano has allowed his art to branch off the career path and wander where it will: who else could turn out the supremely silly *Getting Any?* (1995) in between the exquisite *Sonatine* (1994) and *Fireworks* (1998)? Yet in *Takeshis'*, that freedom has become a terrible stasis. No longer bound merely by his iconic body, Kitano is now weighed down by the copious identities that emanate from and circulate through that body. The narcissist's dream and nightmare: the self reflected in everything yet its actions outside of one's own control, even the ultimate assertion (and immediate negation) of self-control, suicide—though in the multiplicative universe of *Takeshis'*, of course, suicide becomes murder.

The agent of the very appropriation against which he struggles, Kitano has placed himself in a uniquely paradoxical situation. If, as Walter Benjamin claimed, every great work either founds a genre or dissolves one, Kitano's genrefying of his own body marks an inescapable continuity which forbids either ends or beginnings. Whether it forbids greatness as well is a matter of (sharply divided) opinion—but if the granitic, hard-bordered body of Takeshi/Kitano can contain multitudes, magnitudes are hardly surprising.

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Michael Haneke's *Caché (Hidden)*

BY FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ

Michael Haneke's *Caché* is, as its title suggests, an exploration of what lies beneath the surface, hidden within the bourgeois myths of nationhood, culture, family. It borrows the form of a mystery thriller (not solving all of the enigmas presented or fully satisfying the demands of the genre) using its structure to raise highly politicized, disquieting questions about class and race, morality and accountability, within the home and beyond in the social world.

Caché investigates the privileged hermetic world of the white upper middle class family and in order to do so, takes as its premise the narrative conceit that an outsider is threatening the family. Georges and Anne Laurent/Daniel Auteuil and Juliette Binoche and their son Pierrôt/Lester Makedonsky are sent videotapes of, for example, the comings and goings in front of their home, taken by a camera near the premises, or from a car outside of Georges's boyhood house. The surveillance implies an infringement of private space—the realm of the bourgeois domestic world that safeguards its private identity and thus, its security.

The contradiction implicit in bourgeois life is that success is dependent upon one's public image, display and conspicuous consumption, yet at the same time, the home and familial relations are private, and what is released in the social world is carefully monitored. Georges's identity encapsulates the contradiction with all its ironic implications. He is a public figure, a celebrity who hosts a popular talk show on television, a discussion of literature that carries an aura of intellectualism and refinement—high culture in a popular controlled format. He wears a public face by entering homes through his televised appearances. The Laurents are also intensely private people, living in a rarefied world of small at-home dinner parties with choice guests (including Anne's employer, a prominent publisher) who share and appreciate their class and status. Sending Georges and his wife (and later Georges's workplace) videotapes which he and Anne watch on their family television is profoundly ironic—it is an infringement that is delivered in the mode that most characterizes modern communication, that Georges and the public understand best—experiencing a modified version of reality from a safe distance, at home. In addition, the tapes are not distinguished visually from the rest of the film (they are shot in the same style and format, using long sequence shots, often from a fixed position) and this blurring of the boundaries raises epistemological questions regarding how images are read, how reality is validated through the image. Georges has no control over the illicit videotapes and, unlike his television program, cannot mediate or filter what is represented, thus his power is threatened.

The transgression implicit in the tapes—compelling one to view aspects of one's personal life—forces a reassessment and an accounting of actions in order to understand the motives of the aggrieved. Georges is sent on a trajectory against his will, beyond his control. He is also forced to reveal aspects of his life to his wife, to his friends and employer that are typically not shared or unearthed. Georges's secrets slowly emerge. The tapes that are accompanied by crude child-like drawings act as a catalyst that sparks his dreams, his memory, what has been buried and repressed. The tapes and pictures direct him from the present into the past; the images of the outside of his present home in an upper middle-class neighbourhood in Paris, the large ancestral estate in the country, a car-ride to a run down apartment in a working class suburb (on rue Lenin) lead Georges to remember and reevaluate the past, to evoke a childhood incident that reemerges to haunt him in a dream. It concerns an Algerian boy who lived with his parents on Georges's family's estate. He finally reveals to Anne (when the arrival of the tapes compel him to do so) how Majid's parents disappeared, presumably were killed, during the pro FLN demonstrations of October 1961, and that Georges's parents planned on adopting the son left behind. Georges sabotages these plans by maligning the child with false libelous accusations, which his parents accept. He rationalizes his behavior with the contention that he was a child at the time and therefore not accountable. The narrative of sibling



The confrontation between Georges and the cycli

rivalry, of the child who fears displacement and ensures his inheritance and position of power and privilege in the family has ancient antecedents in primal Biblical narratives, but in *Caché*, in contemporary France, the power struggle of family politics is complicated by both race and class.

Caché raises historical stains that not only refuse to disappear (France's notorious oppression of its citizens of North African descent in the 60s) but have reemerged with a vengeance in the new millennium. The question of who is welcome to join the nation and enjoy full rights as citizens is more pressing than ever. (Ironically the news on the TV in Georges and Anne's home covers the usual tensions and violence in the Middle East or India, conveniently not addressing the conflicts at home, in France). France has never promoted multiculturalism or pluralism. Its xenophobic attitude has maintained that citizenship means adopting the dominant culture, but its intolerance of difference contradicts the idea of equal entry in terms of privilege, status and class. France's oppression of its North African émigrés and racism is not easily discussed (coincidentally another film at the Toronto International Film Festival this year, Alain Tasma's *October 17, 1961*, explores these issues. In fact the scene of Majid/Maurice Benichou and his son/ Walid Afkir being transported in the back of a police paddy wagon is eerily similar to the reenactments of the events in 1961 in Tasma's film). *Caché* links the past to the present; these problems remain in the culture. Georges's contentions that he should not be held accountable for actions expressed by a child are contradicted by his behaviour in the present. After leaving the police station (the couple's complaints of harassment fall on deaf ears as there is no evidence of physical damage to body or property), Georges emerges onto the road from between parked cars and is nearly knocked over by a young black man on a bike. He proceeds, in an explosive and rude manner, to berate the young man and almost initiates a fight, which Anne dissipates by partitioning the blame, suggesting that both the cyclist and her husband are at fault. Georges's reaction is not attributed simply to his frustration with the police's indifference; his eruption and lack of civility evidences a racist attitude. It implies a link between his experience of harassment through the tapes and his perception of race and the outsider in French society and culture, undermining the myth of integration, equality and an acceptance of diversity.

Caché exposes the extent to which the bourgeois class safeguard the mythologies that empower it and conceal its dark side. Georges's marriage, evidencing strain, crumbles noticeably under pressure as Georges struggles to maintain an image, refusing to trust his wife with details of his past, at the cost of further estrangement. His reputation is prioritized and honesty is sacrificed (Georges lies to

his wife about having visited Majid and quarreled in his home). He cannot admit to elements of his identity and personal history that evidence his moral blemishes. The tape of Georges's discussion with Majid, where manners are peeled away and Majid is treated with contempt, is sent to Georges's workplace. When he is called in to account for its damaging contents Georges at first assumes mistakenly that it is to discuss a new concept for his show. Instead he receives a warning dressed as a favour, reminding him that celebrities can't have their public image tarnished by scandals of any kind. The extent that Georges is determined to conceal that which undermines the image he has so carefully constructed becomes almost absurd (and Haneke manages to balance the tensions) in the scene following Majid's shocking suicide in Georges's presence. Georges returns home and sneaks into his bedroom, calls his wife on his cell phone and asks her to send their guests away. Anne is overwhelmed and at a loss as to how to deal with the awkwardness of having to ask them to leave. They have lost their ability to respond to life without the encumbrance of first having to protect their reputation and social position. It is only when Georges is alone with Majid or his son that he discards the veneer of 'politesse' and becomes threatening, expressing his desire to fight, twice coming close to physical violence.

Ultimately *Caché* is a study of the tragedy that is the logical end result of bourgeois self-absorption. The Laurents are concerned about their son Pierrôt, cheer his victories at his swimming meets, but are in many ways otherwise almost removed from his life and have difficulty communicating, which the parents attribute to the difficulties of adolescence. When Georges shows up unexpectedly to offer his son a ride back from school, Pierrôt comments on how unusual the gesture is. He questions his father about the drawing sent to him at school in his father's name, "the card you sent," linking his father to the trangressive intrusions that threaten the family. Pierrôt is reluctant to account for his whereabouts, which culminates in his disappearance the night he stays over with a friend failing to tell his parents. When his mother tries to talk to him when he returns the next morning, he seems sullen and angry for reasons he is unwilling to discuss, except to imply that she should ask Pierre, suggesting his awareness of who she was with the evening before and alluding to the possibility of her infidelity. The closeness of the names of Pierre and the son Pierrôt suggests Oedipal undertones and Pierrôt's resentment at being displaced, as do Anne's comments and denial of any relationship, "Are you jealous? What do you imagine? You've got it wrong, I love you, really, I love you." The parents' ambivalence about their son is expressed in 'jokes'; Anne refers to him in a phone conversation as " a macho prick " adding " I wonder where he gets that from." Pierrôt absorbs the tensions that permeate the home without acknowledgement.

Georges's relationship with his mother is also marked by what cannot be openly expressed. When Georges visits his mother and tries to mention the past and specifically the incident with Majid, his mother shuts down, refusing to discuss or remember the painful event. An unhappy memory becomes a forgotten and suppressed one and Georges has learnt this, repeating at various points, "I don't remember." He is denied the one opportunity he seeks to air the past and not surprisingly Georges never consciously admits to any sentiment or responsibility regarding Majid. He refuses to watch the hour or so of the tape he is sent which shows Majid's breakdown and tears following their first meeting. When Majid commits suicide, Georges reads it as his successful attempt to avenge the past and harm him, calling it " a twisted joke".

The children of the two families in *Caché* have to cope with the legacy they have been handed. Majid's son responds to oppression in a very different manner than his father whose suicide results from despair. He stalks Georges, following him into his workplace, demanding to confront him with the suffering he has caused and the lost opportunities that continue to reverberate. He is disappointed to learn that Georges is not visibly troubled by a bad conscience nor does he accept responsibility. His father's death in Georges's presence has failed to move him or induce remorse. Georges's concerns remain focused on self-preservation; his conscience only surfaces when his guard is let down in his dreams or memory flashes that are visualized, intruding abruptly into the narrative. The final scene with Georges shows him lying down in a darkened room. The shot is linked to one taken in long shot, of a little boy being forcibly removed from his childhood home. The final scene in the film, which follows the dream, is also shot in long shot, from a fixed camera position. Majid's son can be seen coming to Pierrôt's school, briefly speaking with him before departing. The next generation, the film suggests, will achieve their ends differently.

Haneke's film is shot in a very controlled, elegant style. The shots are edited precisely in terms of how the spectator is invited to read and understand the film. Haneke is demanding of his audience; for example, crucial details might be imparted in long shot, or camera position and placement will suggest an important narrative element, like the fixed frame used in the scene of Majid's suicide which suggests the scene might be being taped surreptitiously. One must watch carefully and actively, and it is as if Haneke is insisting that films are not discardable entertainment, without denying the hermeneutic pleasure of the mystery thriller. *Caché* builds upon the tradition of the postwar European art film exemplified by directors like Chabrol and Bunuel (however different in tone) who use the cinema to present serious meditations on the politics of everyday life and the dire need for social change.

Heading South (Vers le sud): No Exit

BY RICHARD LIPPE

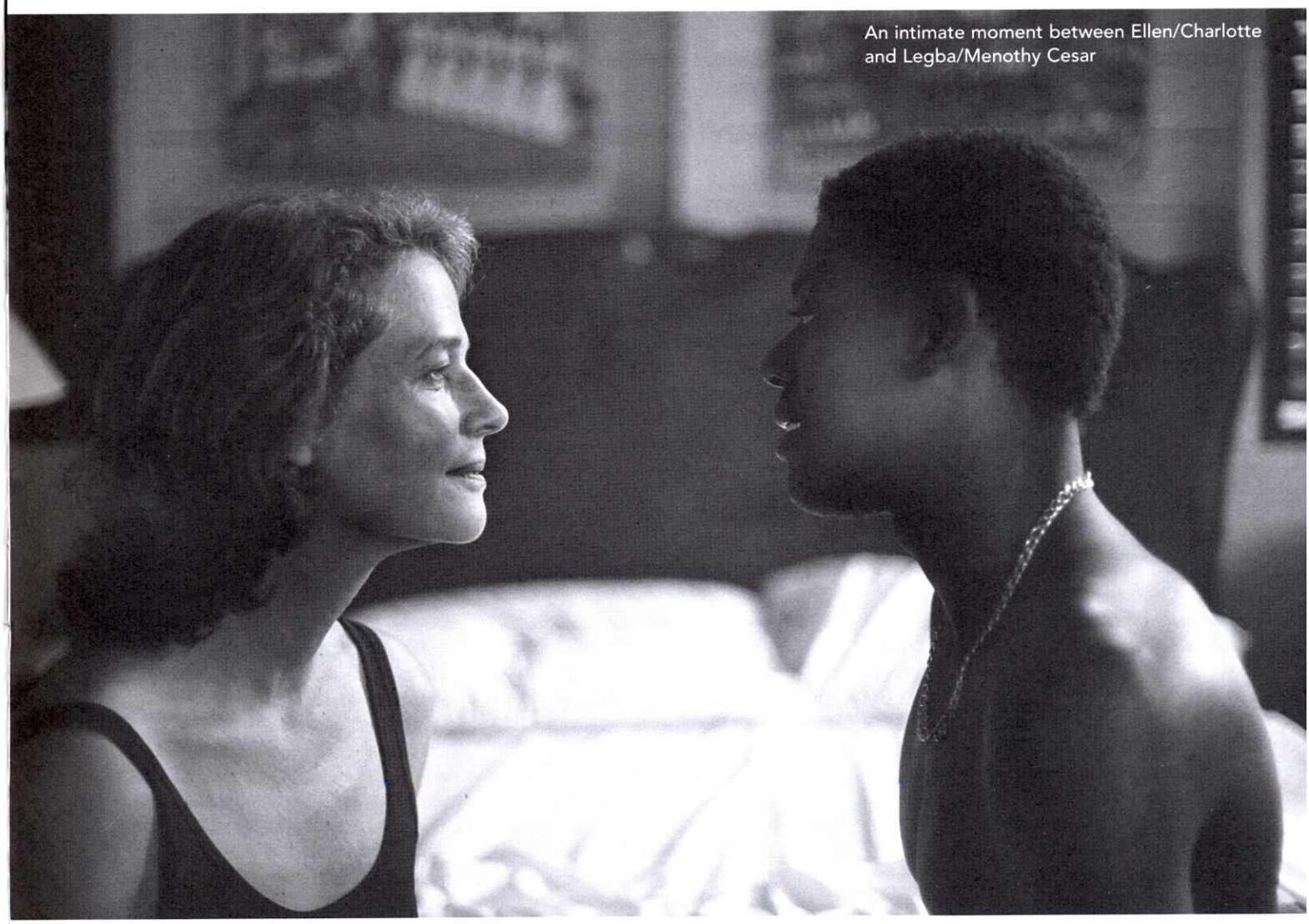
Laurent Cantet established an international reputation with *Time Out* (2001). The film, like *Human Resources* (1998), his first feature, is set in contemporary France, male-centred and concerns the professional and personal pressures imposed on the protagonist. In contrast, *Heading South* is set in Haiti in the late 1970s, when it was still under the control of "Baby Doc" Duvalier. The film deals with sexual exploitation, both among Haitians and third-world sex tourism, the latter in

the form of three middle-aged, middle-class, white North American women holidaying in the country. Two of the women, Ellen/Charlotte Rampling and Brenda/Karen Young, are involved with the same young man, Legba/Menothy Cesar, around whom the story revolves.

Heading South's pre-credit sequence introduces Brenda after she has arrived at the airport and is about to be picked up by Albert/Lys Ambroise, the Haitian manager of the resort where she will be staying. Albert, waiting for her, is approached by a middle-aged Haitian woman who asks him to buy her young daughter. She tells him that her husband has been taken away by the police and that she has no money to care of her child. The woman says she fears her daughter, who is beautiful, will be taken from her and sold into prostitution. Albert politely listen but tells her there is nothing he can do. The woman, in response, tells him everyone wears a mask and warns that it's hard to tell the good from the bad ones. The notion of wearing a mask is taken up soon after when each of the women, in the privacy of their room, directly address the camera, speaking candidly about themselves. Although the device may be a bit awkward, disrupting the narrative's flow, it is necessary to the depiction of the women that the viewer has access to their inner lives.

Brenda, settled in at the hotel, goes in search of Legba, whom she finds alone, curled-up and resting on the beach. He remembers her and they have a friendly conversation which is interrupted by Ellen who calls him over, asking him to join her and several other women. Ellen, who teaches French at Wellesley and has been coming to the resort for the past six years, is playful but clearly in control of those around her. Sue/Louise Portal, a French Canadian who works in a factory, is also introduced; she is easy going and appears to be genuinely comfortable with her surroundings. In contrast, Brenda, a housewife and divorcée from Savannah, Georgia, gives the impression of being shy and reserved.

The beach sequence is followed by one in which Brenda, who is introduced formally by the means of a black/white inter-title, confides to the viewer. She tells us that she visited the resort three years ago with her husband and during the stay she had sex on the beach with a teen-aged boy (Legba). The camera tracks in



An intimate moment between Ellen/Charlotte and Legba/Menothy Cesar

and Brenda's story becomes more intimate. She says that the encounter, which she initiated, produced, at the age of forty-five, her first orgasm. Brenda's retelling of the experience reduces her to tears. The monologue, although sexually explicit, isn't erotic; instead, it is Brenda's attempt to account for her past life and the return trip to Haiti. (The sequence itself evokes Bibi Andersson's famous sex-on-the beach monologue from *Persona*). Her confession is the film's most intimate moment and it shifts the register of *Heading South* away from the implicitly sensationalistic to that of a disturbing character study. Brenda has become an insecure and desperate woman seeking physical fulfilment and a validation of her desirability. The sequence also establishes Cantet's central concern which is the underlying reasons why these women have come to Haiti to have sex. Karen Young's performance is wonderful. In the course of the monologue, Brenda becomes sympathetic and almost accessible; but, as the film progresses, and Brenda acts more openly on her need to fulfil her desires for sexual gratification and romance, Young makes her a very unsettling presence. Ellen's and Sue's monologues are also introduced with an inter-title. Ellen's reveals her bitterness. She talks about her life in Boston and the female students at her school, claiming they make only feeble attempts at having relationships with men. Ellen expresses contempt for these wealthy young women and their dating. Her comfort, she implies, is that her sexual fulfilment is no longer in the hands of empowered men. Despite her insights, Ellen's remarks suggest she may be less than completely aware of what she is seeking at the resort. Sue's monologue begins with an observation on Ellen's life; she wonders if Ellen feels like an outsider, teaching French with a pronounced English accent. The comment is characteristic of Sue who is shown to be the most attentive to others and realistic about her options with men in both Canada and Haiti.

In addition to the monologues and of equal importance, is Albert's subjective narration: angered by a demand by Brenda and Sue that he serve Legba food in the resort's segregated dining room, he says that in the present day Americans in Haiti destroy not with guns but with their money and "...everything they touch turns to garbage." Albert's resentments, towards Americans and, at the moment, the women's indifference to the caste codes he upholds, adds another layer of unspoken but deeply rooted discontent to the film.

Legba doesn't directly address the viewer, perhaps because he is the most unguarded of the major characters; for instance, after making love to Ellen, he gently brushes her hair but, later, when she annoys him, he tells her that she's a loudmouth. (Unlike the much older Albert, Legba appears to have no historical perspective on American intervention in his country; instead, he is grateful for the women's money and seems to basically enjoy their company and interest in him). In contrast, in the town near the resort, Legba and his friends are surrounded by local thugs, and any defiance on their part can be a death sentence. It is in town that he and his childhood sweetheart are briefly reunited when she, now a young woman being chauffeured in a limousine, has him join her in the car. She is the mistress of a powerful local man and says she lives in fear, but wants to meet him again as he is her friend and a connection to the past. The encounter, it turns out, leads to their deaths, a possibility foreshadowed by Legba's hesitancy to enter the car. When informed about Legba's death, Ellen initially blames Brenda, adding that she, with her romantic notions, has destroyed an ideal existence in which relationships were completely free which, as the film has illustrated, is an illusion on her part. Ellen, later, when questioned by the local police inspector, tries to take responsibility for his death, attributing it to a quarrel they had earlier in the evening, with the implication being that they were lovers (to protect him, she offered to take Legba back to Boston, an idea he rejected). The inspector dismisses her claim, saying she knew nothing about Legba and his life. The pronouncement shocks Ellen, shattering the sense of empowerment Haiti provided her and forcing her to acknowledge that life in Boston *is* her life. That the realization devastates her is understood by Albert, who consoles her, showing a genuine concern for her well-being. Like Ellen, Albert believes in maintaining the status quo. His expression of empathy is in keeping with Cantet's concern about the complexity of social existence and personal identity.

Whereas Ellen is forced into confronting herself, Brenda, when she realizes that Legba and what he embodies for her will cease to exist, begins to withdraw. Attending a dance at the resort, Brenda, begins to drink and starts flirting with the Haitian men at the bar and on the dance floor. The next morning, after the dead bodies have been found on the beach and are about to be taken away by the paramedics, she climbs into the vehicle and kisses Legba on the lips. Her gesture and its tenderness are touching; at the same time, it can be seen as another instance of Brenda's erratic behaviour. Later, when Sue attempts to offer her comfort, she turns on Sue, saying she doesn't care what people think, "...all I know is the way he [Legba] looked at me...."

Heading South ends with Ellen's and Brenda's departures from Haiti. The film's final image is the shot of a speeding boat and on the soundtrack Brenda is heard saying "...no house, no husband, nothing to do with men from the North..." and then reciting the names of other Carribean islands she plans to visit. Brenda leaves Haiti without seemingly having learnt anything about herself. The film juxtaposes Ellen's acceptance of her defeat and Brenda's refusal to do so; but given her aggressive and questionable tactics, such as dancing on the beach suggestively with a young teenage Haitian boy to get Legba's attention, and the emphasis she has placed on finding what she needs through sexual encounters, Brenda's future looks bleak. *Heading South*, like Cantet's earlier work, addresses the personal in the political arena of everyday life. In *Time Out*, the protagonist is a middle-aged, middle-class, white, married man who attempts to abandon his adult obligations because they stifle his emotional needs and imaginative life. At the film's conclusion, he returns to his family and, with an almost painful reluctance, to another white collar job. In *Heading South*, Ellen and Brenda are similarly trying to escape from an oppressive social reality through their retreat to Haiti. In both films, the pressures the characters are reacting against are shaped in great part by patriarchy. Although the films have a thematic unity, they are strikingly different in style. *Time Out* is the more subjective film, employing long takes, graceful camera movements, a restricted colour pallette and numerous night



scenes which at times produce an oneiric-like imagery. In contrast, in *Heading South*, the two main locations, the resort and the town, are places of sun, heat and confinement, the visuals are less elegant and there is a greater amount of editing; the result is also dream-like, but closer to that of a nightmare.

Heading South, with its mature women seeking emotional and sexual gratification, evokes the 1950s Hollywood melodramas that featured older stars such as Katharine Hepburn and Barbara Stanwyck searching for love. These films, which include Lean's *Summertime* (1955) and Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956), couldn't be explicit about sex and placed an emphasis on romantic longing and loss. In the 1960s, with the weakening of the Production Code, the subject matter was treated in a more direct and harsh manner, e.g., Jose Quintero's *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1961) and Huston's *Night of the Iguana* (1964). *Heading South*, although offering a blunt look at older women and sex, provides, like many of the classical Hollywood melodramas, a sensitive and sympathetic account of its oppressed characters. While *Heading South* may not be as accomplished a work as *Time Out*, lacking that film's control and precision, it is nevertheless an impressive effort and indicates Cantet's willingness to extend himself.

The Brutal Beauty of Labour: Workingman's Death

BY SCOTT FORSYTH

Austrian filmmaker Michael Glawogger's powerful and moving documentary, subtitled "5 Portraits of Work in the 21st Century", takes spectators around the world to view the havoc capitalist globalization has wrought in the lives of working men and women. This global 'tour' is

viscerally and emotionally overwhelming. We see backbreaking, primitive manual labour in dangerous, miserable conditions, stark refutation to the Panglossian technophilia of contemporary bourgeois ideology. These painful images are not simply agonizing, however, but surprisingly beautiful and poetic. And the workers themselves are remarkably spirited—taking great joy in the skills and craft of their daunting labours and comfort and hope in their collective. This is not a tale of woe and victims but of hard, very hard, work and incipient struggles.

The political analysis behind this canvas is unstated but should be familiar. The harsh class warfare of neo-liberalism has devastated societies all over the world and destroyed and privatized social provisioning. Impoverished labour has been incorporated into the circuits of global capital. Here we see this "modernization" of the global proletariat as a brutal process of exploitation and immiseration.

The tour begins in the Ukraine with unemployed miners illegally scavenging coal in the remains of state mines sold off and closed by 'bandit capitalists' after the destruction of communism in the old Soviet Union. We are trapped with the men and the camera in cramped seams, digging for bits of coal to sell. Above ground, the men and women tell their stories with stoic humour. This unfolds, with grim historical irony, in the coalfields where Stakhanov performed his legendary exploits. The Ukrainian hero was a prodigious miner of coal and his feats became ideologically central in the Soviet thirties; Stakhanovite "super-workers" would lead the march to industrialization. The workers speak nostalgically of the past glories of the miners there. Glawogger even has the men pose, mimicking a giant statue of Stakhanov; in these images, they are the real "heroes".

In Indonesia, workers climb to the edge of an active volcano to chip sulphur, carrying impossibly heavy loads up and down the mountain all day. The product is intended for the most advanced industrial processes. The workers stand in front of the frightening beauty of the fiery lava while being photographed by crowds of Western tourists; it produces a startling *frisson* of contemporary contradictions, of combined and uneven development in the most vicious sense.

A Nigerian slaughterhouse worker comments succinctly "...we are born into suffering because nothing in this country is as it should be." The camera takes us close to the killing and dismembering of goats and bulls in grisly detail and, then, follows the searing of the carcasses in open pits. We pull back to a long view of the vast outdoor abattoir, strikingly beautiful and composed; in an interview, Glawogger compares it to a Bosch canvas. If we overcome our squeamishness at the violent animal death, the difficulty and precision of the work, the colours and patterns of muscles and blood are captivating. Up close, what we hear from the men repeatedly emphasizes the joy and exhilaration of their task—the delight in skill, the feeling of self-reliance in a world where the state has forsaken any social role.

The workers on a Pakistani beach dismantle, piece by piece, a different dead carcass—a discarded oil tanker, the gigantic steel skeleton of the most advanced industrialism. One worker says matter of factly, "...of course, this is a shitty job...death is always with us." Again, we follow the protracted steps of a complex labour process in epic widescreen imagery; the rusting tanker crashes apart with the awesome grandeur of Hollywood spectacle. The workers are posed carefully by the filmmakers and articulate their sense of work, their camaraderie: "We're like brothers to each other."

In a Chinese steel mill, workers toil in flaming archetypal images of industrial labour. These workers echo the Utopian hope of the Soviet thirties with the contemporary gloss of modernization's integration into the international market; despite the closing of many plants, they believe in the future. In imitation of heroic statues, Glawogger poses workers to humanize past communist propaganda and subtly, if humorously, gesture to both the failure and the possibility of what one critic of Communist regimes described as the reality of "actually existing socialism".

In an ironic coda to the portraits, the film concludes back in Germany, in the first world, in an abandoned steel mill that has been preserved as a theme park. Young people walk through this monument to past industrialization, progenitor of the whirlwinds of globalized production that the film has traversed.

Workingman's Death is an epic in both its global sweep across a metaphoric circuit of capitalist production and in its grand and heroic images. But the film effectively counterposes towering tankers and huge glowing steel ovens with individual witnesses, forthright testimony from the actual workers, respectfully framed, standing with their comrades. In the gendered division of labour we see, it is largely men who report but we also hear from many families. They emphasize the dire necessity that drives their mighty efforts and the pride they take in their own skill and tenacity. Those voices and faces, with their dignity, courage and humour, humanize our sense of labour *and* misery.

One critic observed that the film is imbued with "a Marxian esthetic of work." It recovers our sense of both the exploitation of labour by capital and the creativity and humanity that define work despite the mystifying disappearance of labour power into commodity or the ideological cant of modernizing globalization.

The film extends that aesthetic to the labour of filmmaking itself, in its artfully constructed and rhymed images, in the sheer difficulty of capturing this material teetering on the edge of the volcano or trudging through the blood and guts, in a superb musical score by the jazz avant-gardist John Zorn, modulated with sounds of the nations visited. That artistic labour plays with and updates the socialist tradition of class and masculine iconography so the politics is integral rather than didactically articulated.

Glawogger, in an interview with *The New Statesman* (October 24, 2005), observes that "cinema does not have the strength to change the world, but it can change our perception of the world. It is capable of touching all the senses. Of making us feel the weight of someone carrying a big load." Indeed, the filmmaker has accomplished this wonderfully. He goes on to say that "the title of the film, then, is a provocation rather than a statement. It should have a question mark after it." That question mark is provided by the spirit, even hopefulness, of these modern workingmen.

Shanghai Dreams

BY SUSAN MORRISON

If Jia Zhangke has been accepted unequivocally by most critics as an incipient 'modern master', his compatriot and fellow 'sixth generation' filmmaker Wang Xiaoshuai has had a more tenuous grasp on international acclaim. Some of the debate invariably centres around the deliberately slow pacing of Wang's films, their lack of spectacular visual pleasure, and the peculiar way in which his protagonists are held at arm's-length from the viewer. Nonetheless, his most recent film, *Shanghai Dreams* (2005), won the Jury prize when it was shown at the 58th Cannes Film Festival last May. It was screened at this year's TIFF on the last day, where it was also the last film that I saw. This is usually a disadvantage for any film, given the overload that is a common phenomenon for TIFFgoers, but I found that its poignant narrative set in an unfamiliar historical moment and presented in a flat matter-of-fact manner stayed with me longer than the other films I saw.

As with his last film, *Drifters* (2003), *Shanghai Dreams* is set in the past at a particular historical moment which both prompts and marks the narrative trajectory of the film as tragedy. In the late 1960s the Chinese government had relocated many vital industries inland from the big cities to undeveloped regions in order to protect them from possible threat of occupation or destruction by the Soviet Union—this constituted what was called China's 'third line of defense'. Along with the factory went the workers and their families who had to adjust to the unfamiliar rural life and ways. The (English) title of the film refers to the long held desire of some of those uprooted workers to return to the city they had left decades earlier. In order to return, however, they need to obtain official sanction which, needless to say, was rarely given.

Wu Zemin is one such displaced factory worker. While his wife has adjusted to her life as a doctor in Guiyang, he clings onto his dream of moving back to Shanghai. The crisis of the film's narrative is brought on by his inability to let go of his dream of returning and to accept that his wife and children want to be part of the community in which they live. His daughter is the ostensible protagonist of the film (the Chinese title of this film is her name, 'Qinghong'); the romantic relationship that she has formed with a Fan Honggen, a boy from the town prior to the opening scene is the motivating force of the narrative. The film begins with Honggen giving her a present of a pair of red shoes. Her obvious delight with such a remarkable gift ...she tries them on, modeling them for a girl friend... turns to horror when her father comes upon them. He confiscates the shoes, and berates her soundly for accepting them. She meekly follows him home, where he throws them away and orders her into the house. It eventually becomes apparent to the viewer that it's not the red shoes that's the problem (as a Western viewer might suspect, given the bleakness and blandness of the visible lifestyle) so much as the fact that she has accepted a present from a local lad. Wu is dead set against his daughter making any connections with the locals; as far as he is concerned, the family's presence in Guiyang is temporary, to be remedied as soon as they can return to Shanghai. He demands obedience from Qinghong; it is his wish that she devote herself entirely to her studies in order to gain admission to a university in Shanghai. By romantically allying herself with a village boy, he feels that she will be doomed to remain 'in exile' forever. While Qinghong visibly chafes from her father's harsh treatment of her, it is interesting to note that she does not willingly rebel against him. The one time she acts against his wishes-by going to a forbidden dance with her friend Xiaozhen—it is only because Xiaozhen



Qinghong/Gao Yuanyuan



Honggen/Li Bin

has devised and carried out the subterfuge required to evade the father's prohibition, and Qinghong, who has tried to resist, ends up passively acceding to her friend's entreaties. The bubbly Xiaozhen serves as a counterpoint to Qinghong in the film. Where Qinghong's personal desires are put on hold because of her father's needs to maintain his dream of returning to Shanghai, Xiaozhen acts on her's, even if it entails scandal for her family. Her love interest, Lu Jun, is not only a local and the town's 'coolest bad boy', but is forced to marry another girl whom he has impregnated. None of this stops her from trying to get what she wants.

Qinghong, on the other hand, rarely acts against her father's demands. When he insists that she stop seeing Honggen, she arranges a clandestine meeting to inform him that their relationship is over. It is this that shifts the film onto its tragic path, for Honggen can't accept it and ends up attacking and raping Qinghong. This act comes as a surprise for the viewer, for up to this point, he has been depicted as a tender, sensitive and mostly forlorn lover; much of the relationship is one of exchanged glances rather than any overt physical affection. The violence is therefore totally unexpected. The result of this precipitous act is tragic for both of them: she falls into a mute retreat from the world; he is arrested, tried and convicted. A characteristic of Wang's films is that there aren't really any 'bad guys' other than the system itself. So Honggen remains, curiously, an object of sympathy, a victim himself, like Qinghong,of a harsh world beyond his control. Wang's use of the actor Li Bin, to play Honggen reinforces this ambiguous response; as in his role in *Beijing Bicycle*, Li 's screen presence is one of a slender, well-bred, and almost delicate young man in strong contrast to the more robust and assertive youths around him.

The last sequence of the film provides an ambiguous ending in terms of closure to the narrative. Wu and his family finally flee Guiyang for the big city early one morning, but what is apparent is that this 'repatriation' has not been sanctioned by the authorities, so its outcome is tenuous at best. In addition, Qinghong is still in a traumatized state, and a final *frisson* for the viewer comes with the audial connection of heard 'bangs' with their ostensible cause; gunshots from an unseen firing squad as Honggen is executed for the rape.

While Wang's films are much smaller in scope and scale than Jia's, both filmmakers depict individuals caught up in social upheavals about which they can do little. In Wang's case, the determination to succeed is tempered if not foiled by the harsh realities of everyday life in China.

Toronto International Film Festival, 2005

BY ROBIN WOOD

For the second year running I was ill (and in hospital for two days, undergoing tests) for most of the festival. I missed most of the films I'd been most looking forward to (Hou, Tsai, Haneke...). Happily, I've managed to catch up with some since (many have now opened in the city). What follows is a series of somewhat arbitrary notes on the films I managed to see, divided between Europe and North America.

Europe

No great surprises here, the two finest films being by well-established major figures. Caché is Haneke at his provocative best, and once again not merely respecting the spectators' intelligence but placing considerable demands upon their powers of concentration and perception. Florence Jacobowitz is writing on the film here in detail; my own reading will appear subsequently in *Artforum*, made possible by the film's Toronto distributors who (appropriately, given its subject-matter) sent me a video. The other film that strikes me as an indisputable (and very different) masterpiece is Chéreau's *Gabrielle*, expanded from Joseph Conrad's early and unsatisfactory short story *The Return*. The change of title indicates the drastic shift of interest: the story is centred consistently upon the husband, the errant wife barely speaking and remaining an enigma, while the film allows them equal prominence and gives her a voice. Chéreau (who, aside from a string of masterly films on extremely varied subjects—*La Reine Margot, Ceux Qui M'Aiment Prendront le Train*, and *Son Frère*, perhaps the greatest film ever made about dying—collaborated with Pierre Boulez on a remarkable and highly controversial 'Ring' cycle at Bayreuth) has established himself as one of the cinema's great masters of *mise-en-scène*. In certain respects Haneke's opposite (lavish and flamboyant where Haneke is austere), Chéreau resembles him in being unafraid to make demands on the audience both with frequently unpleasant and disturbing subject-matter and a refusal to spell things out: they both insist that you work.

Canada

Two of Canada's most celebrated *auteurs* were represented this year by new films at Cannes, repeated for Toronto. Cronenberg's *A History of Violence* has been much praised everywhere—*too* much, in my opinion. It's a relief, certainly, to find a Cronenberg film free of the sexual disgust that characterized his early work (and that, in his most distinguished film to date, *Spider*, was displaced on to a neurotic child). But I really don't understand the widespread reading of *A History of Violence* that sees it as a critique, a distanced account of the way in which violence, once initiated, can proliferate and multiply. The midway revelation undermines such a reading by restoring the film to one of the most traditional of gangster movie formulas, the old story about never being able to escape one's past, it always catches up with you. It also (it seems to me) cheats: surely Mortensen must recognize Ed Harris from the outset? And yes, I can understand how the gentle and clearly non-athletic son, provoked, can explode into violence, but not that he can abruptly develop the prowess of Superman. Egoyan's mystery thriller *Where the Truth Lies* has been sufficiently chastised already, and I don't want to linger on it. I found it quite intriguing for its first half (after which one really ceases to care who did "it" or anything else, the characters being so generally unappealing). From there on the film seems to invite that famous joke about the man at an Agatha Christie play who, during a particularly tense moment, informed the breathless audience that "The butler did it." I would put in a word for poor Alison Lohmann, who has been the butt of



Gabrielle

much critical animadversion: her character is *supposed* to be naive, inexperienced, out of her depth, all of which she conveys quite touchingly.

The Québecois C.R.A.Z.Y. has received an enthusiastic press and apparently an immense popular following. I really can't imagine why. It's one of those films that batters you with its noise and its in-your-face style, which becomes very wearying within half-an-hour (the running time being more than four times that). I suppose we still need films reminding us yet again of the destructiveness of the patriarchal nuclear family and the monstrous macho father, as the institution, for all the battering it has received, still refuses to die, but need they be so obvious? It has its telling moments, most notably perhaps that near the end where the father, in the foreground, his headphones on, listens to the Patsy Kline record that gives the film its title, with an expression of dreamy inanity, while his wife, in the background, realizes that their eldest son is dead from a drug overdose—the wife, to whom no one ever listens, being established throughout as the only intelligent member of the family. But the film as a whole is so unpleasant that such moments tend to get lost.

The finest of the four Canadian films I saw is Deepa Mehta's *Water*, the completion of her trilogy about the oppression of women in India. One could say that, in the context of modern cinema, it's somewhat old-fashioned—very much the traditional "protest" movie, following its traditional trajectory to a very powerful conclusion. But confronted with so much spurious contemporary "modernity" that comes as something of a relief. Mehta, it seems to me, has made great strides as a filmmaker: in the earlier films, admirable in their preoccupations and their anger, one felt at times that the filmmaker had been too easily content simply to "make a point". But *Water* shows a consistently mature feeling for "cinema" and all its elements. One might I suppose object that the film is too beautiful, but I think that's a misreading: its visual beauty has the function, not of distracting us, but of counterpointing the suffering of the women under the most monstrous and stupid restrictions and cruelties with the beauty of the land- and seascapes with their intimations of a possible freedom, the beauty of natural fertility with the oppressiveness of obsolete and unnatural restriction. A marvellous film which I look forward already to revisiting.

USA

Finally, to prove that something good can still come out of the United States, even under its present administration, there is Noah Baumbach's *The Squid and the Whale*. Baumbach (the son of Georgia Brown, whose film reviews in the *Village Voice* were notable for their intelligence) is clearly an outstanding director of actors, both as individuals and in *ensemble*. As everyone in the cast is perfect it is perhaps invidious to single out Jeff Daniels, but my thirty-five years in academia, where I have never felt at home, have sensitized me to the nuances of his portrayal of the "typical" academic in all his complacency, self-satisfaction and unearned assumption of superiority. This is clearly a film that will repay repeated visits, and it deserves more detailed treatment than present space permits.

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